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The Hiring Fair
Hearts of Gold
Creature Comforts

Jessica Stirling

CORONET BOOKS
Hodder & Stoughton

First published as three separate volumes

The Hiring Fair © 1976 by Jessica Stirling
First published in Great Britain in 1976 by Hodder and Stoughton
Pan paperback edition 1977
First published in paperback in 1988 by Hodder and Stoughton
A division of Hodder Headline PLC

Hearts of Gold © 1987 by Jessica Stirling
First published in Great Britain in 1987 by Hodder and Stoughton
Pan paperback edition in 1988
First published in paperback in 1996 by Hodder and Stoughton
A division of Hodder Headline PLC

Creature Comforts © 1986 by Jessica Stirling
First published in Great Britain in 1986 by Hodder and Stoughton
Pan paperback edition in 1987
First published in paperback in 1996 by Hodder and Stoughton
A division of Hodder Headline PLC

This edition published in 1999

A Coronet Paperback

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ISBN 0 340 76722 7

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

Hodder and Stoughton
A division of Hodder Headline PLC
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

The Hiring Fair

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PART ONE

Travellin' Folk

One

THE MAN HAD been looking at her for five minutes or more. At first Mirrin ignored him, but his persistence was so curious that, capitulating, she pushed herself away from the cornstore wall and, with hands on hips, stared pointedly back at him.

He laughed.

Laughter was the last reaction Mirrin Stalker expected. In spite of her annoyance, she found herself smiling ruefully. That was invitation enough. Sauntering through the ranks from the labourers' benches, the stranger tipped his hat and eased into conversation as if he had known the young woman all his life.

"Tell me, what does a handsome lass like you hope t'find at Lanark Hiring Fair?"

"Employment," Mirrin replied.

"On the land?"

"I'll take what I can get."

"Let me guess, then, what you're best at."

"I'm best at fendin' off the attentions of men like you."

"Where's your common sense?" the stranger demanded.

"What?"

"You'll never get work talkin' that way. Meekness is a sterling virtue in this market. Aye, you're too bold for the sleekit wee farmers in this part o' the world. God, their wives would have a fit if they toddled home wi' you on a string."

"I'm an experienced servant," said Mirrin. "A housekeeper, in fact."

"Then try the bureau in Glasgow," the stranger advised. "This is a bad fair for soft hands."

"Call these soft?" Mirrin held out her palms for his inspection.

"Aye, I have seen softer," the man admitted.

"What about you?" Mirrin said. "I haven't noticed you bein' plied with offers."

"I've had my share," he said. "But, t'tell the truth, my heart's not in it this time of year. Besides, the gowks round here are wary o'givin' papers t'the likes o'me."

"What's wrong with you, then?"

"They can spot a tinker a mile off."

Now that she looked at him more closely, Mirrin could see the strain in him. But there was little physical difference between the gypsy and the short dark-haired men that made up most of the population of her village, some twenty miles away to the north. In Blacklaw, Northrigg and even Hamilton, she had encountered many men more obviously robust. This man was only a couple of inches taller than she was, though compact, tamped down like a buckram wallet for neatness in the carrying. His hair and eyes were dark brown, and his skin tanned like nutwood.

"A tink, are you?" Mirrin said. "I should have known by the hat."

Tipped raffishly back from his face was a flop-brimmed felt, ornamented with a crop of small coins and medallions stitched to the ribbon. His shirt was cut full, clean patched cream flannel, his leather waistcoat shrunk like a bolero. The kerchief around his throat was polka-dot red, matching the handkerchief loosely tucked in the vest pocket. He still seemed to be laughing, though his lips were pursed as he studied her in turn.

She knew how she looked, tired still after the long, hard winter. Her pallor was pasty; any collier in the country would have marked her as a coal-picker at a glance. Even so, though she was no more than average vain, she had to admit that she was the most attractive girl in the square, tall and full-figured and not — as the stranger had pointed out — meek.

On the women's benches, the other females, even the young ones, waited with hang-dog submissiveness. Their persons were neat but their characters were somehow drab, showing a hopeless, almost belligerent, resignation. The next job, they seemed to say, can only be worse than the last. They changed fees as often as their terms allowed. None, however, were true migrants, as the tinkers were, or the new breed of manual workers who charged about Scotland and the North of England in search of high wages.

The hiring fair was for farmers — growers, herders, berry-men, drovers. The work offered was hard and dull, the annual fee small. The stranger was right. Mirrin did not belong here. Though some men cast speculative glances in her direction, no one dared approach her. No one responded to her smile and her murmured advertisement, "Servant, sir? Experienced servant? I can cook an' sew. I'm strong and healthy."

Those qualities, undiluted, were, she realised, enough to put any traditional farmer off.

"The name's Thomas Armstrong. You can call me Tom, if y'like," the stranger said.

"What do I call you if I don't like?" Mirrin asked.

"I've the price o' two teas an' a bridie between us."

"I told you, I'm not here for a picnic. I'm here for work."

"Where are y'from?"

"Blacklaw."

"A dreich hole, that."

"It's my home, Mr. Armstrong."

"Is Lamont's pit in full production again?"

It was not a particularly perceptive question. The Blacklaw mining disaster of 1874 had been the talk of Scotland.

Mirrin nodded, not willing to be drawn.

"Did you lose somebody in the explosion?" the man asked.

Mirrin nodded again.

"A husband?"

"Two brothers an' my father, if y'must know."

"Aye, I'm sorry," the stranger said. She sensed his sincerity. It was not hollow commiseration like that usually offered to the folk of Blacklaw by those who did not understand the depth and breadth of the tragedy and imagined that such wounds healed in time. "Was it that drove y'out?"

"Partly," Mirrin replied.

"Are you . . . alone?"

"I've a brother in Edinburgh, an' my Mam an' two sisters still live in Blacklaw. No, Mr. Armstrong, I'm not without a place t'go back to, if an' when I choose."

Armstrong sighed. "What *are* you doin' here?"

"Escaping, I suppose," Mirrin said.

"Had enough of sortin' black gold, then?"

"More than enough."

"But y'said you were a servant?"

"Just what is your interest in me, Mr. Armstrong? Have you a contract of hire in your pocket?"

"No."

"Then away back t'your side of the square an' hope that some blind drover comes along that's got no aversion t'tinkers."

Armstrong shook his head, clapped his hands together and glanced off down the lane that debouched from the square of stores and two-storey cottages. Trees, laden with May blossom, lay very close to the small town, and the road dipped and rose again on to the breast of the green, sheep-speckled hill. The spring sky was big with sunlight and the flight of clouds, open and inviting.

"I've no stomach for this county, really," Armstrong said. "I just dropped by in the hope of seein' a friendly face or two."

"But you didn't."

"Just yours," Armstrong said. "It's bonnie, but no' that friendly. So, I think I'll toddle on my way again."

"Where to?"

"Ayrshire, like as not."

"Good luck t'you, then," Mirrin said.

"Listen, it's too late into the mornin' for a hire now," Tom Armstrong said. "In the afternoon, maybe the gentry'll have a factor or two on the scout for a servant. Right now, most landlords are only thinkin' of dinner an' a dram."

"Tea an' a bridie will do me fine," Mirrin said.

"Half a bridie," Tom Armstrong said.

"An' I'll pay my share."

"I knew it."

"Knew what?"

"That you were a lady at heart."

"Aye, that'll be right," Mirrin said. "Now where's the tea-stall. I'm starvin'."

"This way," Tom Armstrong said.

Two

FLORA STALKER PAUSED on her trudge up Blacklaw's steep main street. The shawl which protected her head and shoulders from drizzling rain was beaded with moisture. When she halted a single droplet gathered and splashed, like a tear, to her cheek. Impatiently she brushed it away.

Before her, jutting on to the pavement which fronted the row of miners' cottages, a pair of thin legs barred her progress. The legs were humped inside a shiny cotton skirt and presumably connected to a trunk, arms and head somewhere within the tiny lobby of the house. As Flora watched, the creature inched backwards like a snail lured from its shell by the smell of rain.

"Not much of a day, Georgina," said Flora to the legs. "The start of a wet winter, like as not."

Georgina McKenzie's head appeared, plastered with ragged wisps of hair. "Is it yourself, Flora Stalker?"

"Aye."

Stiffly the woman sat back on her heels, the skirts negligently flopping into the suds that oozed down the worn steps, dabbed her scrubbing brush on to the bar of carbolic and propped it on the edge of her bucket.

Flora sensed what was coming. Georgina was by no means the most malicious woman in Blacklaw, but, this last year, Flora had become fair game for gossipmongers.

"How's your lad, then, Mrs. Stalker? Doin' well at school?"

Fine well Georgina McKenzie knew that Drew was at Edinburgh University.

As if by rote, Flora answered, "Drew's doin' just grand."

"An' Mirrin: what's she up to these days?"

"Domestic service," Flora intoned.

She was sorry that she'd stopped for a blether: it was a habit she must learn to break.

"Oh, a *housekeeper* again, is it?"

"Parlour maid," Flora lied.

"I heard a rumour she was workin' on a farm." Georgina peered like an oracle into the depths of her bucket, not meeting Flora's eye. "Is it a dairy parlour maid she is?"

"No, it's a big house in Ayrshire," Flora said curtly. "She likes it fine."

"Aye," said Georgina in a tone that signified disbelief. "Hughie — m'son: he's articled to a very good carpenter, y'know, in Hamilton — Hughie was sayin' there's been some changes up at Lamont's place since Mirrin left."

"I wouldn't know anythin' about Lamont's," Flora Stalker retorted.

She had never had much interest in the coalmaster's private life or what went on in his mansion. She realised that her daughter, Mirrin, and Houston Lamont had been close, but shut her ears to the scandal. Outwith the Ewings and one or two of Alex Stalker's old cronies, Flora and Kate had no close friends in the village now. Flora wanted her son and daughters to live much as she had lived, to grant her the things that a woman of her age had a right to expect, acceptable, unoriginal sources of pride. How could she be proud of her children when she did not know what they were doing with their lives?

Brusquely, she said, "I've an appointment, Georgina. I must be on my way."

She turned and started uphill again, ignoring the McKenzie woman's anxious cry, "An appointment, Mrs. Stalker? At the pit, is it?"

Precious little privacy had been left to Flora; what remained she would protect to the letter. It was none of their business what she did. She would die before confessing that she had no idea where Mirrin was, or that she had not had the scrape of a pen from Drew since he'd left Blacklaw in May. Not even today.

Today was her birthday.

She hurried on. The familiar landscape of Blacklaw no longer protected her: the graceless sweep of Main Street topped by colliery gates and winding towers and, on a green knoll across the shallow valley, the coalmaster's handsome mansion. Between these poles stood unbroken rows of cottages, a couple of shops, the schoolhouse, the pub, the kirk, and the kirkyard where her husband Alex and her sons, James and Douglas, lay buried, together with all the stability which had been blasted away in the black spring of '74.

Flora Stalker had lost more than her menfolk in the explosion in the damp-ridden underground seams. One by one, after that, through circumstances she could not fully grasp, she had lost touch with all her children, even with the girls who had remained at home.

Today was Flora's birthday. She was fifty-two.

Nobody had remembered.

Kellock's Good Bread Bakery stood at the upper end of Main Street, tucked back from the cottage rows and overshadowed by loud tin hoardings on the gable of the *Lantern*. Though Willie Kellock did his best, mere bread could hardly compete with the glamour of Four Crown Whisky and Tencher's Heavy Beer. Bakehouse and shop shared a shallow yard with a rickety shed in which a local cabinetmaker stored timber. Men on 'change shift' declared that the scent from Kellock's ovens was appetising enough to *compel* you to blow a couple of pence on a big paper bag full of piping hot rolls.

The bun shop was as bright and clean as a Salvation Army cornet, with a wee square window and a deal counter the colour of a crusty brown loaf. One shelved wall led through an arched corridor into the bakehouse at the back. In addition to bread and rolls Willie baked and sold parkins, meat pies, bridies, sponge cakes and a black bun so rich that one slice would keep a man nourished for a week.

William Kellock was a kindly widower in his mid-fifties. Under a scant sandy-grey thatch his nose and chin would have done Punch proud. After his wife's death Willie was faced with the choice of shrugging off his dingy memory-haunted house in Polmadie or of hitting the bottle. As boozing had never been his vice, he gathered himself together mentally and physically and sought redemption in the hinterlands of Lanarkshire.

Blacklaw was the fourth of the half dozen sites that Willie had marked as worthy of investigation. Careful survey satisfied him that he need search no further for Nirvana. The bakehouse was broad enough to accommodate a couple of ovens and the retail shop — though not large — would suit the scale of enterprise he originally had in mind. Domestic quarters above the shop were too large for a single man, but the fact that the courtyard was only a couple of hundred yards from a gate which regularly disgorged three hundred hungry miners was the clincher.

Business got off to such a flying start, however, that in the first month he had been obliged to hire a laddie to grease the tins and sweep out the shop. Now, in his second month, he felt it necessary to relieve himself of selling and concentrate on the baking, which was really where his skill lay. Besides, he had a notion to press the boom in trade while the going was good.

A brass bell tingled cheerily as Flora Stalker pushed open the door of the shop and stepped hesitantly over the threshold. Brushing raindrops from her face, she carefully folded her shawl and primped her hair.

"Well, well, Mrs. Stalker!"

In a white apron and striped shirt, the baker appeared out of the brick corridor on a blast of hot air, like one of his own pastries sliding from the oven. His smile and tone were warm, conveying the impression that Mrs. Stalker's presence in his shop was all that he required to fill the day with sunshine.

"Is this not terrible weather?"

"Aye, terrible." Flora kept her large, red-knuckled hands below counter level. "Still, they tell me the harvest's all in an' that's good for the farmers."

"Good for us all, the Lord be thankit," said Willie without a trace of piety. "And now, how can I serve you today, Mrs. Stalker? The usual crusty?"

"Not . . . not today, thanks, Mr. Kellock."

"Parkins, then?" asked Willie hopefully. "Light, or well-browned. Take your choice."

"No, I . . ." Flora hesitated. "It's the card in the window."

"The card?"

"In the window, Mr. Kellock. About the job."

"*That* card!" said Willie. "Aye, Mrs. Stalker. What about it? Have you somebody in mind that might suit?"

"Me, Mr. Kellock."

"You, Mrs. Stalker?"

"I'd like to be considered for the job."

Bemused, Willie shook his head. "Oh, no, now, I don't think that would be right at all. It's not just for the shop, y'see."

"Aye, I know what it's for."

"It's really for the van. What I'm after's a big raw laddie, not a . . . a lady like yourself."

"Your consideration does you credit, Mr. Kellock, but I need to earn a wage, an' I'm stronger than I look."

"The shop . . . oh, aye, you'd be fine for the shop, Mrs. Stalker. I couldn't ask for better. But not for the van. An' I'm fixed on the notion of a van. It'll be out in all weathers, too, without much protection."

"I promise I'll hap up well, Mr. Kellock."

The baker bit his lip. "I don't know. It's nothin' personal, Mrs. Stalker, but . . ." A fresh thought occurred to him. "Does Kate know you're here?"

Flora's features firmed. If there had been less need for diplomacy she might have snapped out her answer. As it was her tone was barely civil. "No, Mr. Kellock, Kate doesn't know I'm here. It's what in a younger person you'd call 'initiative'."

Willie stuck his tongue in his cheek and contemplatively tapped his nose with his forefinger, thoughtfully.

"Please, Mr. Kellock," said Flora, but not plaintively.

Throwing up his hands in capitulation, Willie smiled. "Well, why not, Mrs. Stalker? But it'll be *hard* work."

"The Stalkers aren't afraid of that, Mr. Kellock."

"Six o'clock start, to catch the night-shift coming off, then again at two o'clock, for the . . ."

"For the day-shift, an' the back-shift," Flora said. "An' then the night shift again."

"No, no, I'm no slave driver, Mrs. Stalker. I wouldn't ask those hours of anybody. I'll do the final run m'self."

Flora said, "As you wish, Mr. Kellock."

"The wage as advertised," Willie said. "Plus, a mixed bag of cakes an' pies an' a loaf per day." Seeing Flora's eyes harden again, he added hastily. "Bakers always do that. It's tradition, I assure you, not charity."

"Thank you, then, Mr. Kellock," Flora said. "I'll see you at a quarter to six tomorrow mornin'."

"Can you . . . er, drive a van, Mrs. Stalker?"

"A van?" said Flora, then promptly added. "I can drive anythin' if I have to."

"Good, good." Willie watched the woman leave the shop, so lost in thought that he neglected to step forward to open the door for her. He wasn't thinking of the mother, though, but of the daughter. He hoped Kate Stalker wouldn't blame him for what had happened. He wouldn't want to do anything that would cause him to lose face with Kate.

Still, he thought, as he returned to his mounds of dough, there might be advantages to both sides in hiring Flora Stalker. He just hoped that Wallace would take to her, that was all.

The Stalkers' house was not as it had been when the menfolk were alive. Kate's return from work at Lamont's sorting tables and Betsy's arrival from Dalzells' Emporium in Hamilton did not dispel the hollowness, though on that late-September evening there were diversions to keep depression at bay. Firstly there was Flora's news that she had taken the job advertised in Mr. Kellock's bakery; then there were presents to open and admire — for the girls had not forgotten her birthday after all. Lastly, and most important, Kate had received a letter from Drew. She had collected it from the postie on her way to work and had saved it unopened to add to Mam's birthday treats.

The news that Flora had taken work, though, put the letter momentarily out of Kate's mind.

Eldest of the family, it seemed that Kate was destined to remain a spinster. In the last year she had become drawn, her gaunt features accented by neatly braided hair. On the other hand, Betsy Stalker had blossomed. Her features were refined, her hands delicate, her hair frivolously groomed into loose sausage-shaped ringlets which, bobbing and tossing, drove the impressionable young men of Hamilton quite wild. Mirrin was the handsome sister; Kate, the plain; Betsy pretty as a picture in a storybook, and fully aware of the value of such natural endowments.

Tonight, Betsy suppressed her disdain for the working women. It would only be a matter of time before Drew honoured his promise to introduce her into Edinburgh society. This dream sustained Betsy. She had not, however, expected to be informed that her mother would soon be driving a horse and cart round Blacklaw's streets. Outrage overwhelmed self-control.

Betsy blurted out, "Well, I think it's *disgraceful*, so I do."

"Nobody asked you, miss," Kate warned.

Potatoes chugged inside the iron pot on the stove. From a smaller pan broth released an appetising steam. None of these creature comforts made the least impression on Betsy. She tried to imagine how the changed domestic circumstances would affect her, what village gossips would say about her, how the staff in Dalzells' would sneer at her if it ever got back to them that her aged mother had become a common carter.

"When they hear of this in the shop," Betsy cried, "I shouldn't be surprised if I'm asked to leave."

Once, Kate would have humoured her sister. But Kate had no energy left to expend on the spoiled child.

"Well, if you're asked to leave," said Kate, "I dare say I can find you a job at the pit. How would that do?"

"But my friends . . . !"

"It isn't your fine Hamilton friends that put the bread on this table, Betsy," Kate reminded her.

Flouncing, Betsy rose to retreat to the sanctuary of the back bedroom. There she would salve her injured pride by brushing her ringlets or experimenting with alluring perfumes from the collection of cheap vials which she wheedled from the silly lads who thought themselves madly in love with her.

"Sit down at that table," Kate commanded.

"I'll . . ."

"You'll *sit*."

Biting her lip, Betsy obeyed.

The birthday treat for Mam had been spoiled now. Hoping to restore some sense of occasion, Kate quickly extracted the letter from her pocket.

"This arrived today," she announced.

Immediately Flora's eyes lit up. She was seated at the table, the two gifts on the plate — mittens from Kate, a cheap handkerchief from Betsy — forgotten in the excitement of hearing at last from one of her prodigals.

"Is it from Mirrin?"

"No, I think it's from Drew."

Betsy clapped her hands, squealing, "From *Drew*!"

Solemnly, Kate lifted a knife from the table and slit the long envelope. She slid out a sheet of parchment-like paper — appropriate for a budding lawyer — and scanned the manuscript. Mastery of copperplate script had been one of Drew's minor accomplishments during his year of private study with Dominie Guthrie, headmaster of Blacklaw school.

Betsy cried, "Give it to me, Kate: you read too slow."

Still studying the letter, Kate swung it out of Betsy's reach.

Pouting, Betsy said, "Well, go on then, read it aloud. What does he say? Does he say anythin' about *me*?"

It was the first communication the family had received since Drew had departed for Edinburgh five months ago. Though Kate tried to convince herself that her brother was simply too occupied with his studies to spare time to write home, she felt slighted by his ingratitude. Only Kate's drive and Mirrin's sacrifices had enabled Drew to assume his place on the benches of the university. But every penny of his fees and livings had had to be earned, scraped out of thin air. Even then it would not have been possible if Mirrin had not obtained a patronage for her brother from Houston Lamont. It was Lamont's twenty pound annuity that had finally given Drew his chance and fulfilled the rash promise that Kate had made to her father just before his death.

The promise had been kept. But the doing of it had splintered the family. Would it be worth it? Idealism had been Alex Stalker's motivating force. Opportunism, unadorned, spurred Drew.

At the back of her mind all that day had been a nagging doubt about the sentiment which had prompted Drew to write on his mother's birthday. She had forgotten how callous Drew could be.

Tracing the words with her finger, Kate read aloud.

Though Drew sent stilted greetings to his mother and sisters, he did not mention the birthday. He excused his long silence by explaining that he had been studying very hard to make them proud of him. Gow Havershaw, Lamont's Edinburgh lawyer and

Drew's reluctant mentor had, so Drew said, obtained his pound of flesh by using him during the vacation as a jobbing clerk in the offices. Magnanimously, Drew admitted that the experience had been quite valuable. Then, abruptly, as if he had suddenly wearied of the filial charade, he moved to the point of the letter. In spite of the flowery phrases Drew's demand was crystal clear.

"Notwithstanding that Mr. Havershaw pays my quarterly emolument precisely on time, mainly, I suspect, to avoid antagonising Mr. Lamont, he did not see fit to recompense me for the many hours spent jobbing. As I had not anticipated that I would be expected to donate my labour entirely from charity I failed to adjust my five pounds accordingly for the period in question and have thus been obliged to borrow from a classmate to purchase food. I fear that, with the onset of winter, lack of nourishment and anxiety incurred by being in debt to a fellow, will have an adverse effect upon my concentration and that I may . . ."

Kate let the letter slide to the table.

"He wants us t'send him more money," she said. "That's why he wrote."

Betsy shot to her idol's defence.

"You don't understand him, do you?" she shouted. "None of you have *ever* understood him. He *must* get proper feeding or he won't be able t'study. He wouldn't have written to *you* if there'd been any other way."

"He'll have no more from us, Betsy," Kate said. "We don't have it to give. Let him struggle on his allowance."

"An' what about the debt, then?" Betsy said.

"It'll only be for a shillin' or two," said Kate.

In fact, the debt disturbed her. Debt was a phantom which haunted all colliers' families, the desire to keep a ha'penny ahead, secure in the knowledge that nobody could press for payment at an awkward time and ruin the flimsy structure of domestic economy.

"He can work for that, if he's so worried about it," Kate added.

"He *must* be worried," Betsy cried, "or he wouldn't've written to *you*. Send him *somethin'*, Kate."

"*You* send him somethin'," Kate snapped. "Stop buying that trash you spray on yourself an' send your precious brother the savings."

Flora Stalker pushed herself from her chair. Her brow was creased and the set of her mouth indicated that she was learning to arbitrate between her two remaining daughers as once Kate had had to act as peacemaker between Drew and Mirrin.

"I'll have no more of this bickerin'," Flora said. "Not on my birthday. Kate, how much is in the stone jar?"

"Six shillings and five pence."

"Send six shillings to Drew."

"But Mam, we're saving to buy you a warm coat."

"Send that money to Drew, I tell you," Flora insisted.

In the past Flora had always deferred to Kate or Mirrin, but tonight she felt unusually confident.

Startled by their mother's authority, Kate and Betsy fell silent.

Flora said, "I'll make it up out o'my week's wage."

"All right, Mam, if that's what you want," Kate said. "But I must make it clear t'him that there's no more."

"You'll do no such thing," Flora said, adamantly. "If Drew needs help then he'd best come t'us. We're still his family, remember."

Slighted, Kate turned to the stove. Noisily she slid bowls from the rack and ladled broth into them, planting them before her mother and sister. She lifted the potato pot and laid it to simmer on the hob. Her hands were ingrained with dirt from the streams of coal that rattled and slurried endlessly down the shutes. Even if she ceased such labour tomorrow, her fingers would never again regain their smoothness or mobility. At twenty-six, she was already marked for life. Why should Drew escape? Mirrin had gone, too, taking care of her own destiny, disgracing them in the manner of her going. At the time Kate had felt sorry for Mirrin, but that sympathy had dwindled. She envied her sister now.

Plucking Drew's letter from the table she tossed it on to the mantel. No doubt Betsy would filch the letter for her tawdry collection of mementoes, to pore over by the light of a tallow dip in the safety of her room, feeding her dreams of satin and silk and eligible, wealthy young bachelors that, in her inflamed imagination, made up the citizenry of the capital.

Deliberately Kate kept her back to the table. She could hear the clink of spoons, the shifting of Betsy's dress on the chair, the creak of the table, the peevish crackle of dross in the chimney's throat and, faintly, the multitude of sounds that filtered in from the street and the colliery. Each individual sound was identifiable yet so familiar that the ear no longer took heed. Poverty and grief were like that, so familiar, so constant, that they dulled the senses and, worst of all, numbed the will.

Kate was sensitive to the changes in herself but totally unable to counter them, to return to what she had been half a year ago. She had lost contact with an enduring source of strength, the struggle of keeping the family secure and intact. In that striving, however hard, there had been life and hope. But what dared she hope for now? Precious little! In a year or two Betsy would fly the coop and Drew would have no need of them, not even to borrow money. And Mirrin — Heaven alone could tell where Mirrin was now or where she would wind up. For sure, it would not be Blacklaw. So what would happen to her, a useless spinster chained to meaningless habits. She would live on in this cramped house, slave daily at the troughs, pinch to hold soul and body together, until Mam died: then she would live on again until some winter the icy wind would spear holes in her lungs and she too would die — here alone.

Kate performed the routine suppertime chores without conscious thought, feet shuffling her across the room from stove to sink to table, a treadmill in miniature. As she turned, her eye involuntarily caught her father's chair, deep and sagging, larger than the rest of the sorry collection of furniture. Her Mam's chair now, more comfortable than the others. She would inherit it, if she waited long enough; payment for patience and dutiful humility. Beyond the chair was the alcove bed in which her father had died. He had died peacefully in the night, after months of pain and struggle. He had died content, soothed by the promise he had extracted from her in his last hour. Kate recalled that burned and ravaged face and heard again the words he had murmured in her ear: "It'll not be easy, nothin' is ever easy, but you'll do it, will y'not? You'll see that it's done, just as I ask?"

Now it had been done, her father's will. Drew had been set on his royal course, equipped to better himself, the lot of the favoured [illegible]

She had loved her father, yet she found that her love was diluted by a kind of hatred, a loathing for the ideal that had robbed them of respect for each other and shown up the family's loyalty as shallow and fraudulent.

Aye, she would send Drew his money. She would have sent it anyway. She would not have left him in debt. Debt was a thing she understood.

She ranged the plates to warm and seated herself to eat her soup. Hunger had gone. She ate listlessly.

After an awkward pause, Mam said, "Willie Kellock gives his employees a free loaf every day."

"That's nice," Kate said, flatly.

"Charity," Betsy remarked, sipping from the nether edge of her spoon as they did in Hamilton restaurants. "It's just an act of charity to the poor Stalkers, don't y'see."

A violent, seething impulse possessed Kate like a demon. She yielded to it as Mirrin would have done, tempestuously, regardless of consequence.

Saying not a word, she lifted her hand and smacked it twice across Betsy's cheek.

The girl's astonished wail was deafening, choking into a breathless sob of disbelief. The keening brought Kate sudden, absolute relief and Betsy's petulant weeping moved her not one jot towards contrition. She regretted only that Drew had not been there to receive his share of retribution; and that Mirrin might never know how alike their characters had become, shaped by strife and tragedy and change.

Three

THE MEN SQUARED up to the last row in the field. Corn stubble lay clean-scythed behind them, the earth relieved of its burden, ready to be revived again by sun and rain before next year's sowing. There was no need now for the reapers to hone their oak-backed whetstones along the blades. It was no more than a gesture of respect to the farm's last standing stook, a 'touch wood' that this profitable hiring might lead to another of the same before the fruitful season waned.

The summer of 1876 had been late in coming. But slow bloom was best bloom and in the end all Ayrshire's tillage had run heavy with grain, a grand harvest promising full bins and bread-crocks, cheaper meal in markets and corner shops. Prudent farmers like Maclean would hold back enough grain to nourish the tupped ewes to drop sturdy lambs on the snell March pastures. There was little work for casual hands at the lambing time, Mirrin Stalker had learned. Few travellin' folk had much truck with mutton except as a lining for their stomachs. Besides, spring was a long haul yet and the harsh winter months had first to be endured.

Already many families had shifted from the land, drifting away with their packs and cuddy-carts, abandoning cold camps for the pleasures of cheap communal lodgings and rowdy pubs in the cities of the central plain. The exodus had become something of a tradition in itself. Nobody thought much of it except die-hards like Mag Marshall who railed against the deserters, called them mongrel *gorgios* and spat contemptuously into the pot fire to flavour her curses.

Mirrin paid little attention to the matriarch's rantings. She considered the discomforts of the gypsy life small beer compared to the struggle for existence in a pithead village in the sump of Lanarkshire. Never had she looked or felt better. She was slimmer and more lithe and her hair had a sheen to it. Though Betsy would have disapproved of the freckles which sprinkled the bridge of her straight Stalker nose, the grime of Blacklaw's dust had been bussed from her skin by the sea breezes which laved the coast from Ballantrae to Largs.

Stretching to slacken her shoulders, Mirrin watched the reapers and binders tackle the last of the rigs with superstitious zeal.

Suddenly an arm slipped about her waist and hoisted her from the ground. Snaring her playfully, Tom Armstrong ignored her struggles.

"What are you grinnin' at, m'lad?" Mirrin demanded.

"Yourself, m'flower," Tom answered. "You draw breath as if you'd suck in the stooks, the rooks and half the damned firth as well."

"God's good air is free for all, as far as I know," Mirrin retorted. Contact with Tom's arm rested her. She leaned back against his chest.

"Aye, but of highly variable quality," Tom said. "The sniff here is better by far than the soot where you came from, is it not now, Mirrin?"

"You make it sound as if I'd sprung through a trap door in the roof of Hades."

"I'll tell you this, Mirrin," Tom said, "if Auld Nick himself was fashioning an ambassador to tempt a man from the straight and narrow he could do a deal worse than take you for a model."

Mirrin jabbed her elbow into the man's midriff and, as he released her, spun round to challenge him. "I think that's an insult, Tom Armstrong."

"I meant it as a compliment, for once." Tom grinned again, in the arrogant manner Mirrin had come to know well over the past months.

Over tea at the stall in Lanark back in the spring, Tom had soon persuaded her to try her luck out of the county. They had travelled to Ayr to meet with Mag Marshall's clan and soon Mirrin found herself learning to harrow and hoe and pick over dreels of early spuds shoulder to shoulder with the weatherbeaten tinker women. The life seemed romantic and free. The warm summer weather encouraged her to stay.

Life for Armstrong, however, was a slack tidal process. It was typical of him to assume that she would be content to float with him like flotsam in a backwater until the quickening current of opportunity tugged them apart. Mirrin realised that she could not allow herself to drift into a lasting relationship with this man, that common-law marriage was not for her. The hurt of losing Houston Lamont was too recent to tempt her into giving away her heart again like a Valentine trinket. To do him credit Tom did not regard her as a casual woman. He showed no signs of seeking to cajole her into his bed sack. He treated her as an equal, a fellow spirit, so different from Rob Ewing, the collier who had been daft in love with her. She might have married Rob if he had not been so priggish. Tom was different too from her father and brothers, men steeped in the work ethic, however much they rebelled against its obvious injustices. The past rode easy on Tom Armstrong and the future was a cuckoo-land behind tomorrow's hill — or so Mirrin thought at the time.

"Take a rip at that row with the rest of them, Tom," Mirrin said. "It's a luck-bringer, is it not?"

"Aye, but it's pagan luck."

"Well, since you're no God-fearin' Christian, maybe you'd best lay in stock with the other side."

"You're a real adder-tongue, Mirrin."

"Are you requirin' a hand t'lift that blade?" the girl asked sweetly. "It'll maybe be a wee thing heavy for a skelf like yourself."

Stepping to the rig, Tom bullied into the rank, arched his scythe, paused to catch the rhythm and shuffled on with his mates, their blades devouring the last golden swathe.

No, Mirrin told herself, as she tucked a spray of binding straws into her belt and stooped among the gathering women, Tom Armstrong is not the one for me.

When the last of the harvest was bound and stacked, the tinks and farm hands wended up the lane above the bay of Creagan. Drystone dykes defined the contour, leading the eyes to majestic Arran, whale-backed Kintyre and out to the lonely pyramid of

Ailsa Craig, blue and insubstantial on the horizon. The sun was veiled by cloud now and only the gaudy voices of gulls and crows and the chittering of sparrow flocks relieved the melancholy. Inland the rowans burned yellow and red-berried in a slant of sunlight, the oaks, elms and beech trees that ringed Lord Scales' estates vivid as braid against the plain brown Holland of the hill, sad too with the soft day's waning.

Mirrin and Tom walked side by side, dusty, sticky, and in need of a sluice at the yard pump before they joined the others in the barn for a feed and the ceremony of totting up the wages. Trestle tables had been set up, laden with potted meats, huge loaves, butter tubs and a cheese the size of a cartwheel. Kegs of home-brew and gargantuan teapots steaming on hot bricks promised to slake the deepest thirst. For all their anticipation, only the youngest children were entirely insensitive to the sadness of the evening and the end of the long summer — the youngest plus Colly, Mag Marshall's daughter.

Last summer Tom had been indiscreet enough to play the gallant to Colly, and reap the profit of being the apple of Mag's eye. The heavy Melton jacket which warmed his back on cold nights had been the pick of a bundle scrounged in Ayr. All the men in camp had squabbled for it, but it had gone to Tom. The medals and coins which decorated his hat had mostly been presents from old Mag. His surrogate mother-in-law fed him the best gobbets of meat from the pot and, when times were lean, sacrificed others' shares to make sure that her Tom Dandy was fed like a fighting cock.

What the old woman wanted in return for such favours was a husband for Colly, a strong raffish young stallion to breed grandsons out of Colly's loins, grandsons who would assume the name of Marshall and preserve Mag's very tenuous connection with the famous tinker tribe of Galloway. Tom would be a useful addition to the family in his own right, of course. She would soon mould him to her will when she had her claws in him.

"*Tom! Tom!*"

"God!" Tom exclaimed, rolling his eyes heavenward.

"*Tom, it's me!*" Colly insinuated herself between Mirrin and the man, using her plough-handle hips to shove her rival out of step.

"Are you hungry then, Colly?" Tom asked pleasantly. "Ready for the feed?"

"I'm takin' a walk up t'the loch for a dip after supper, Tom," said Colly directly. "Are y'for comin'?"

"I'll see," Tom said.

"It'll be dark b'then, so nobody'll see," giggled Colly.

"It's dangerous swimmin' the loch in the dark."

"Ach, we'll not do much swimmin', if y'know what I mean."

"No, Colly," said Tom, innocently. "What d'you mean?"

"Y'ken fine, Tom," said the girl, slyly.

Pregnancy would be one means of trapping Tom, Mirrin thought. He was probably daft enough to do the honourable thing. After all he was half-tinker and did treat Mag's ravings with a certain respect. Surely he would draw the line at wedding Colly, though. A blind carthorse would draw the line at that.

Ignoring Mirrin, the tinker girl grabbed Tom's arm and threaded it through her own. Mirrin dropped back. Tom glanced over his shoulder, a pained expression flitting across his face as he gave in to the situation that his own lazy opportunism had helped create. Though Mirrin was unaware of it, there was danger in thwarting Mag Marshall's plans, in treating Colly as a dolt. Tom had often witnessed knife-play in the camps in the past and knew only too well what could happen to an outsider — man or woman — who invoked the anger of the matriarch.

The barn supper was almost over before Tom had a chance to free himself from Colly's clutches. Farmer Maclean was doling out the wages, the last act of that year's harvest: five shillings a day for the men, half that for the women, and a sixpence each for children over ten.

Mirrin knotted her silver coins into a cotton scarf and wedged it into the waistband of her skirt. Four shillings of her hard-earned cash would find its way into Mag's scuffed satchel in camp later that night, the matriarch's tithing. But there would be quite enough left over. Some to spend, some to jingle, as her Da used to say, though, God knows, there was seldom enough left to jingle in the Stalkers' house. The coins made a lump against her stomach. She would not squander her earnings. She was too much a collier's daughter to fritter her money away on betting or boozing or on buying gaudy scarves and rings.

She glanced round the barn in search of Tom. As if in answer to her summons, he stole up behind her and gently touched her [redacted]

"For God's sake, Mirrin," he whispered, "let's away out of here while that damned girl's busy countin' her haul."

"Not goin' for a swim, then?"

"I'm disinclined t'joke about Colly Marshall," Tom said. "Listen, we'll slip away t'the Creagan Inn. It's only about a mile from here."

Conspiratorial glee came over Mirrin. Frustrating Mag and Colly Marshall was just a game to her. She could not take the tinkers seriously. Life was too lax, too rich, too promising to sully with quarrels. Colly was a joke, that was all, and Tom the butt of it.

Ducking behind the ranks still waiting to be paid, she said, "Come on then, m'lad. I'm in the mood t'be plied with gin and lugged home on your shoulder."

The expected quip did not come.

Tom had already slipped out of the barn into the twilit safety of the yard.

The Creagan Inn was a long, low cottage with a thatched roof. It reminded Mirrin of engravings she'd seen of Robert Burns' birthplace, though that was in another part of the county. The inn squatted on the old highway, the traffic largely gone now, tapped off by the new broad road which followed the coast. From the Inn, though, the view was magnificent, out over the raw fields to deep jade waters and the Arran peaks silhouetted by the sun's loitering reflections on the underbelly of the cloud.

Mirrin sighed and settled on the bench in the side garden, back to the whitewashed wall, skirts spread, boots unlaced. Life was good here, a far cry from Blacklaw. Here in the benign countryside she felt at home. Her mood of depression had passed.

She sighed again.

"Is the brew not t'your taste, Mirrin?" Tom asked.

"The brew's fine, Tom. In fact, I'm just thinkin' how good it's been here in Creagan."

"Aye, but we'll be leavin' tomorrow — travellin' south."

"I've no doubt it'll be just as much fun elsewhere."

"Fun? I've heard the rovin' life called many things but never 'fun' before."

"It's fun for me, after what I've been used to."

"Heartless places, mining towns," Tom agreed.

"No, there's as much heart in Blacklaw as anywhere, maybe more," Mirrin said. "It's just the dirt, the sameness of things that makes it ugly."

"The sea's the same the whole way round," Tom told her, crooningly. "All wet. And farms: there you're bound by the needs of the beasts and the changes of season and the arrival of renting day and the markets an' . . ."

"You're not locked in by walls all the time, though."

"You know little of life, I'm thinkin'."

"I know more of life than you'd credit, Tom."

The man shrugged. Clearly he did not believe her.

"I *chose* to hitch on with you," Mirrin said. "I chose t'stick with the Marshall clan an' I'll string along only as long as it suits me."

"Do as you please, y'mean?"

"Aye, an' why not?"

"You're wide of the mark in judging the rovers. We're no more free than your colliers. A winter on the road'll soon show you that, Mirrin. In a twelve-month we'll be back here, harvestin' for Maclean again. It might be a lean year or a fat one, rain or shine or wind, but that'll be all the difference. You should be content, Mirrin."

"I am: very content."

"Aye, but can you be content with insecurity as a way of life? There may seem to you now t'be a wisdom in it, a healing maybe, but that's an illusion."

"For me, or for everyone?"

Tom did not reply immediately. She studied him by the light of the lantern on its bracket by the inn gable. Inside the public bar a man laughed, a bray as gritty as chaff.

At length, he answered her question lamely. "I follow the work, that's all."

"An' I chose the work," said Mirrin. "Until now I lived my life on a rail between the house, the pit and the kirkyard. Tomorrow I'll sleep in a fresh field."

"In the rain, maybe."

It had rained before and the huts and tents had remained snug and dry. Mirrin said, "I wonder why you stick with the tribe, Tom, if you feel that way about it?"

Armstrong shrugged. "It's only a habit. To tell the truth I'm thinkin' of changing my style."

"How?"

He shrugged again. "I might go back to sea."

"I didn't know you'd been a sailor."

"Just a couple of short jaunts as a deckhand, to Denmark an' the Low Countries; but enough to whet my appetite for more. My Daddy was a sailor."

"I thought he was a gypsy."

"He was that too, but there's no law that says a man must be permanently labelled from birth," Tom said. "The old man, my Daddy, didn't take to the road 'til after he met my Mam.

"He wanted her from the moment he clapped eyes on her. At first her family wouldn't put up with a sailor for a suitor. There was fightin' and bloodshed — but he got her in the end. The tinks have always admired persistence, even in *gorgios*. Father gave up the sea and took t'the road and became well known among the travellin' folk."

"When did he die?"

"Nine years ago. I'd just turned seventeen — old enough to look out for myself. Soon after, Mam married a crofter and went t'live on the Isle of Harris where she is still, last I heard."

"So what do you plan to do with your life, Tom?"

"Maybe I'll away t'sea." Tom sipped his ale. "On the other hand maybe I'll try for a farm somewhere an' put down roots. Buy a table t'stick my feet under. It depends on you, Mirrin."

Startled, Mirrin sat forward. "On me? What have I to do with it?"

"I've already saved a bit," Tom said. "If the pair of us worked hard for a year or two and salted away our silver we could start out with a patch of ground of our own."

"We?" said Mirrin. "Are you askin' me t'live with you?"

Enigmatic as ever, Tom grinned. "Unless you feel it'd cramp the style of a free woman like yourself."

Mirrin shook her head in bewilderment. "*You'll* never settle, Tom. Aye, we might go through some sort of tink betrothal, but one day you'd find the pull of the road too strong an' that would be an end of us. You'd be off with a whistle an' never a glance back."

"Don't you trust me, Mirrin?"

"Don't sound so grieved, Tom."

"I'm a man o'my word, Mirrin."

"Aye, but which word, Tom?" Mirrin said. "Anyhow, if you're minded t'settle down, the perfect candidate for a mate's right here in camp."

Tom looked blank for a moment, then his eyes widened in horror. "Colly?"

Mockingly, Mirrin said, "Maybe you'd not get that farm patch, Tom, but you'd have the right t'sling your tent on the driest ground and all the juiciest pickings from the pot. You could even invest your savings in a cuddy-cart for the old woman to drive while you sat in the back an' puffed your pipe like a real tinkie lord."

"Don't jest with me about . . . about Colly Marshall," Tom said. "God, but there's a cold streak in you, Mirrin Stalker. I never noticed it 'til now."

"You're sayin' that just because I refused t'share your bed. Have you never been refused before?"

"I've never asked before."

"Do you usually just take what you fancy?"

"Mirrin, I asked you t'share my life, not just my bed," Tom said.

He finished his ale and rapped the mug down on the bench. She had insulted him, but did not know if that was perhaps part of a devious plan too. She was sure of nothing at that precise moment.

It was almost full dark. An owl was screeching over the hedgerow quite close at hand and a bat, like a fragment of cloth, was flittering in the boughs of the blackthorn.

"I can see you've been hurt in some way, Mirrin," Tom said.

"I told you, I lost my Da and my brothers in . . ."

"I think you've been hurt by a man."

"No man you know, Tom Armstrong."

The tinker was motionless, hands folded in his lap in an attitude akin to that adopted by the old women of the tribes, patient, perceptive and prepared.

"So *that's* it, you're runnin' away from a man," he murmured.

"Maybe I am runnin'," Mirrin said. "But it's not from a man. No, nor to a man either."

Lifting his hat from the bench he shook it to make the coins jingle, studying it and not the girl. He got to his feet.

"We'd better go back," he said. "It'll rain soon."

Mirrin rose too.

"Rain'll not matter now the harvest's in."

"It matters to us," Tom said. "You'll find that out before the year's end."

Lamont's mansion on the knoll outside Blacklaw had changed hardly at all since the days when Mirrin Stalker had been housekeeper. The rooms were still grand and gloomy, heavily varnished like oil-paintings preserved for their heirloom value. In the coalmaster's study, the tall coffin-shaped clock still ticked sonorously. The desk was littered with papers, bills and balanced ledgers, a quarry of facts and figures out of which a cloverleaf of liquor decanters and a coal oil lamp jutted like landmarks.

The view from the window behind the desk had a more honest aspect of decay. The first autumn storm had stripped down twigs and leaves, leeched green from the grass and irrevocably puckered the last of the border blooms. Within the mansion the withering was more subtle and insidious and not confined to any particular season.

Neglect showed too on the owner of the house who slouched in his leather chair, boots carelessly propped on the debris on the desktop.

Houston Lamont was handsome in a dark, dour, doomed Scottish manner that hinted at nobility dishonourably mixed with peasant coarseness. Under a hopsack morning coat his shoulders were as menacingly broad as a coalheaver's, though stooped now as if the effort of hauling a hundred thousand measures of coal out of the earth by proxy had finally caught up with him. His features were furrowed beyond the point of dignified restraint. It was a visage that would have frightened children with its unyielding introversion. But the solitary child of that household had died many years ago, and there would be no others now to rekindle affection and sweeten the bitterness of middle age.

Even Houston's sister Dorothy, whom he loved without fault in spite of her feyness, had been transformed into a sinister threat and, in a sense, stolen from him, though she still lived in a shuttered room upstairs.

Lamont sat motionless, head cocked, gaze riveted to the study door, listening.

The mutter of voices told him that his wife Edith and her housekeeper, Anna Thrush, were hard at work, conspiring. In a minute or so Edith would release Anna to her duties, admit herself uninvited to the study and plunge into the topic which had obsessed her for the past four months.

He held his listening pose until tension prompted him to move. His eyes smarted from the cigar smoke that drooped like withered wreathes within the room. He had not been out of the house in four days, had hardly left this room in all that time, sleeping here two nights out of three.

Rising stiffly he took a few aimless turns around the study, his head pivoting always towards the door, the cigar spilling ash on his jacket lapels and waistcoat beneath. He nursed a kind of rage, tamed by indifference to his own selfish suffering, as a zoo-caged bear will adjust to the wild and savage urges which trouble its cramped captivity.

The women's voices dwindled, then gradually returned, to end in a duet of polite twittering laughter.

Lamont returned to his chair and dropped into it just as the door opened and Edith entered the room. He watched her warily.

Edith's oval face had become plumper and her body had thickened. In the past months, however, her choice of dress had become less sober and she had even taken to boning to show off her bosom to best advantage. The display of cleavage was not for his benefit. He understood, as he was supposed to understand, that it was for another man, any man, an additional personal fillip to the power that Edith sought in the arena in which she had finally chosen to make her stand.

"My goodness, Houston!"

She held a cambric handkerchief over the lower part of her face and crossed with rapid clipping little steps to the window. She grasped the brass handle, yanked at the sash and eventually raised the frame several inches. The cool dampness of the garden seeped into the room gradually dissipating the tobacco smoke. Edith waited, back to her husband, until streamers of blue-grey smoke thinned then, forcefully, she pumped the sash shut and seated herself on the hardwood chair opposite him.

"I confess, Houston, I am at a loss to understand why you behave in such a manner."

Lamont crossed his feet at the ankles. His boots were drab and unpolished. One lace was frayed. He studied the woman.

Time and events had altered Edith too, but the manner of it was different. Burnished: that was what Edith had become. Others suffering damage found the essential part of themselves dulled: not so Edith. If anything she would appear to have passed over, rather than through the tragedies of the past eighteen years. Aware of his silent scrutiny, Edith's eyes narrowed and her fingers linked in her lap.

"I wish to talk with you, Houston."

Lamont did not respond. How many hours of conversation would be required to change one iota of the past, to restore one fraction of what had been lost?

"Donald Wyld called last evening and you refused to see him," Edith said. "That was hardly the act of a responsible person, Houston. Do you no longer care about what happens at the pit?"

"Donald called here on your instructions, Edith, not on mine. I had nothing to say to him."

Edith simpered. "Wyld's more your man than mine, Houston. He is, I believe, an excellent colliery manager. You have extolled his virtues often enough in the past."

Lamont nodded: Wyld *was* an excellent manager, trained and experienced, seasoned now by the horrors of full-scale disaster and its aftermath.

"Wyld is fast losing patience, Houston," Edith said. "He is, after all, *only* a manager. He needs to be given instructions to function. There are limits to what he can take upon himself, particularly in such an erratic climate."

"Donald knows what to do."

"He has even taken advice from me," said Edith.

Six months ago such an admission would have been unthinkable.

It was true that he had neglected the manager, and the management, of the colliery. In the past months, using the determination and fervour which she had formerly applied to social climbing in Edinburgh's aristocratic monkey-puzzle tree, Edith had acquired considerable knowledge of the economics of colliery administration. In fact it would not be too much to say that, recently, she had become almost as much a coalmaster as he was. He regretted, vaguely, the insult to Donald Wyld.

Collecting his wits, Lamont gave the woman a little more of his attention.

"I appreciate that it has not been easy for you, Houston," Edith was saying. "It's because I care deeply for you and for the colliery that has been your life that I am compelled to bring up this matter again."

"What matter, Edith?"

"To implore you to see Sydney Thrush."

"I do not require another manager," said Houston, wearily. "I cannot afford another manager."

"Examine the figures, Houston." The invitation was plangent with irony. "You will find that management of a high order yields high returns. Why, Lord Blaven raised this question only last week before the Commission on Mines. The report was in *The Times*."

Edith had all the half-baked fanaticism of a convert, seizing on every wayward pronouncement as if it was relative to the stink and filth of the seams. Textbook management must seem simple to Edith, stripped of dirt and damp, props, ponies, barrows, engines, cages and, most of all, of men.

Bluntly, Lamont plucked out the most hypocritical phrase from her talk. He said, "*Do* you care deeply for me, Edith?"

"Of course, my dear."

"In consequence, you must also care deeply for Dorothy?"

"I have . . . great sympathy for poor Dorothy."

"Enjoying your regard, Edith, is a dangerous habit."

After a pause, Edith said, "Not so dangerous as it might have been, my dearest."

"Please do go on," Lamont said, acidly.

"I could have blackened the Stalker name and have brought scandal not only to that miserable colliers' family but into our drawing room, into this fine house, the 'mighty' house of Lamont. But I did not."

Smouldering hatred in her husband's eyes did not halt the flow of recriminations and self-justifications.

"What cause have *you* to be bitter?" she continued. "We forged a bargain. I have kept my part of it to the letter. Do you not suppose that the doctor would have been most interested in the degeneration of poor Dorothy's condition? Do you not suppose, Houston, that the medical consultant from Glasgow would have read significance into the fact that Dorothy was rescued from an open window only last Friday — rescued by me, I might add — and that it was obviously her intention to . . . I dare hardly say it."

"Kill herself?" Lamont snapped. "She sought only to escape from the room. Besides, *she* didn't open that window. She hadn't the strength. That window, that second-floor, roof-level window was opened by another hand — *deliberately*."

"Dorothy is stronger than you imagine, Houston," said Edith. "Anna Thrush carries bruises from struggling with her."

Lamont could not ignore the possible truth in Edith's claims. His sister was a large woman, gaunt but sinewy. He sank back into the chair, cowering from the doubts that Edith had raised. At length he said, "What more do you want of me, Edith? You run the mansion as you please. You staff it with pallid little skivvies who scamper through the corridors like frightened mice. You entertain such members of society as are prepared to overlook the unrefined source of your capital for the pleasure of helping you spend it and who are polite enough not to raise an eyebrow at my non-appearance at the dinner table. You have found a stalwart companion and highly efficient housekeeper in Anna Thrush. You have banished me . . ."

"No, Houston, I will not allow you to be so hard on yourself. You have *chosen* this ridiculous housebound exile. I did not foist that upon you."

"No matter: no matter," Lamont said. "Just tell me what you want now?"

"Interview Sydney Thrush."

"God!" Lamont lunged from the chair in irritation. He leaned on his knuckles on the debris on the desk, scowling. Her single-mindedness was intense enough to be classed as a vice. *Ennui*, fostered by will-power, took him again and, fishing a cigar from the box, he sank heavily back into the leather and spent some moments with match and tobacco, concentrating his attention on the proper igniting of the cigar. He had hoped, vainly, that Edith would have sense enough to let go. He should have known better.

As he exhaled a cloud of smoke, Edith sat forward in her chair. "Please, Houston," she insisted. "See Mr. Thrush. Judge him for yourself. If you find him as praiseworthy as I believe you will, then you would do well to engage him."

"As what?"

"As colliery manager."

"Over Donald Wyld?"

Lamont watched Edith's struggle. Even her superficial examination of the colliery's financial state must have told her that Wyld would not hold with a down-grading; that if Wyld left there would be trouble, trouble more serious than the general dissatisfaction with wages and conditions that had already resulted in many lost hours of work, pithead scuffles and even the vandalising of surface gear and offices.

"Under Wyld, of course," Edith answered.

"What makes this Sydney Thrush so extra special?"

"His experience."

"Donald Wyld is experienced enough."

"Not in dealing with men."

"Hah! Donald is a wizard with the men, a quieting force."

"Mr. Thrush has more experience in that area, I assure you."

"*More?*"

"He was employed by Lord Howden."

"Ah!" said Lamont. "You did not include that information in your last anthem to Mr. Thrush."

"And by Mr. James Finnie at Barrowgill in Fife."

"So — Thrush is a strike-breaker."

"He is a rescuer of collieries in trouble."

"A strike-maker, and a strike-breaker," said Lamont. "Where did you acquire the catalogue of his virtues? From Anna?"

"Partly."

"Have you met him?"

"I . . . I have."

"Where?"

"In Hamilton. I was adequately chaperoned, of course."

"Yes, of course," Lamont said. "He impressed you?"

"Yes, Houston. Must I tell you a thousand times. Sydney Thrush is the person we need right now. He could forestall a desparate situation. He could be a great boon in the difficult times that lie ahead. He would take the weight of responsibility from your shoulders, give you more opportunity to enjoy life."

"And if I interview him," Lamont said, "may I ask him how many heads he has cracked, how many families he has cast into the gutter, how many sick children he has helped to the Better Land Beyond?"

"You are *impossible*, Houston!" Edith rose to her feet.

"The pit is not in profit, Edith."

"I know that, you fool."

"It's the profit that concerns you, is it not?"

"The pit is your life, Houston. I am only concerned with saving it."

The hypocrisy was smoothly applied, ire and concern whisked into a bland wifely application. Lamont considered the effects of agreeing to Edith's proposal. He knew that if he interviewed Sydney Thrush he would be obliged to engage him. Wyld would chafe against sharing managerial responsibility but perhaps he would not jeopardise his position by threatening to resign. Edith, for her part, would keep her sharp eye on everything, her protégé Thrush included. And he, nominal owner of Blacklaw Colliery, would hardly have to stir himself out of his chair, only reach for his pen and scribble his signature to the documents that Edith slid before him from time to time.

"I have no need to interview him, Edith," he said, evenly. "If you advise Thrush's employment then I will sanction it. For all it matters to me, you and he and that sister of his, can run the house *and* the pit straight to hell."

Edith showed no trace of triumph.

"But," he said, thinly, "if Dorothy is harmed in any way — d'you hear me, my dearest? — if Dorothy is harmed, then I will contrive to destroy you and your accomplices, aye, and this mansion and all that's in it."

Edith sniffed and lowered her eyelids demurely.

"Are you stating terms, Houston?"

"I am."

"I will send for Mr. Thrush on Monday."

"I have no need to interview him, I tell you."

"Come now, Houston. Such formalities are expected of a coal-master. They are part of *my* terms."

Lamont rose from his chair and walked lumberingly around the desk towards her. For an instant it seemed that he intended to strike her. She did not quail from him, standing by the door, chin tilted. In him, however, was no aggression, only fatigue and resig-[redacted]

"Very well, Edith," he murmured. "On Monday, I will meet with Sydney Thrush."

Four

None of Edinburgh's aromatic flavours escaped Andrew Stalker that summer of '76. Fascinated by the capital, he measured its anomalies subjectively. He balanced George Street's wealth against the abject poverty of the Royal Mile's closes, the dignity of kirks and colonnaded banks against the ramshackle decrepitude of the Cowgate, Princes Street's frock coats and pompous toppers against the barefoot tatters of Leith Walk's scrofulous urchins. With considerable dejection, he was finally obliged to place himself in the company of the lesser mortals of this world. Lamont's annual grant of twenty pounds and tuition, however bountiful it sounded back in Blacklaw, lacked elasticity in the city and could not be made to stretch Drew away from the brink of penury. In his more disgruntled moods, Drew debated if Lamont's parsimony reflected the coalmaster's true regard for Mirrin, and if his passion had, all along, been similarly niggardly.

Whatever the way of it, on the basis of his background and low financial standing Drew found himself excluded from the company of the elegant, roistering bluebloods whose favour he coveted. He was also cold-shouldered by his fellows in poverty, lads quite perceptive enough to sense his disdain and be wary of his ruthless superiority. Every passing day, every perambulation through Edinburgh's genteel streets, every imagined slight or prick of envy, served to stiffen Drew Stalker's determination not only to merge with the upper classes but to scale to the summit of their artificial pyramid, via the stout, well-chiselled blocks of the legal profession.

Jobbing for Gow Havershaw had given him insight, indicating that beneath the murmurous courtesy of legal affairs were certain exploitable frailties which an astute young gentleman, shielded by an established firm, might turn to his personal advantage. He salted away such knowledge as raw material which, when he had mastered his letters and acquired the protection of a degree, he might exploit with all the dogged zeal that his father had once applied to pithead politics.

Even Gow Havershaw's niggling refusal to fee him for his services only steeled his resolve to wring wealth and respect from the diffident city.

Gow Havershaw's musty chambers were well suited to business of shady triviality. Around the walls of the inner sanctum, spilling out into the wedge-shaped tank, records of all the Havershaws' past dealings reposed, machinations mummified in dreich rows of lichen-grey box files and liver-coloured cardboard 'melodeons'; interminable correspondence, court reports, deeds, wills, municipal actions, parchments more ornate than Royal decrees, documents fox-spotted with senility, bills, claims, appeals and muted threats — stuffy lawyers' blackmail, twenty thousand tracts on the art of circumlocution. The ceiling friezes were of tartar-yellow plaster, the panelling cracked like dark brown ice-floes, the floorboards warped, the clerks' tall desks stained and upright as town gibbets.

Havershaw had crouched at his desk, back to the leaded window with its four inset panes of bullseye glass which distorted the view of the sober frontage of Dowdall's Temperance Hotel, as if the lawyer could not bear to donate even *that* vantage to his clients clear and unimpaired. A circular wooden chair with a leather cushion, like a cow pat, was aligned before the desk. Havershaw's carved oak throne towered over it, a shelter for the man. He had peered out of a lattice of smokey sunlight, out of shadows of the chair's fretwork and, plucking his lip with his thumb, had hummed and hawed his way to an explanation.

Standing, Drew had not moved a muscle, nor uttered a word in protest. One part of his mind was collecting phrases for the future, another was rioting furiously at the injustice of such legal robbery.

"Ah, Stalker, yes, even during the course of, ah, a single term of instruction, one would have, ah, supposed that you would have, ah, become familiar with the principles attendant on jobbing, and, ah, general clerking and would, ah, have appreciated the inestimable value of taproot training in, ah, procedures not in general covered by the, ah, learned professors. The law student is, of course, ah, expected to undertake such menial work to inculcate in him a respect for the, ah, minutae of procedures and to, ah, inculcate in him habits of obedience, punctuality and neatness and, ah, all the graces, shall we say, of subservience to the needful disciplines of the law, to which we, ah, are all bounden. But, ah, in apprenticing, shall we say, oneself to a placed member of the profession, the student, ah, is given benefits far beyond those that could be purchased for a fee. Ah?"

Gow Havershaw's eyelids drooped over his pale, sandy eyes as he reclined in the chair and crossed his arms over the lapels of his slope-fronted morning coat. The lawyer's voice reminded Drew of kirk sermons and, by a strange analogy, of port wine and pork with apple sauce.

"Such opportunities are not, ah, scattered upon the cobbles of the Canongate, young man, as, aha, I'm sure you'll agree."

"Sir," Drew had said, tightly.

"Your, ah, patron, Mr. Lamont, will be gratified to learn of your diligence and, ah, co-operation. I shall, as is your due, write him to that effect and assure him that, ah, he is not throwing his silver down the, ah, proverbial stank, if you take my, ah, meaning, Stalker."

"I am not to be paid."

"That is correct."

"But, Mr. Havershaw, I did not expect to be paid."

"Did you not now?" Havershaw's intransient smile had indicated that he knew Stalker to be lying. "You have your personal accounting, ah, in good order, Stalker? Is it prudently apportioned through the current quarter?"

"Yes, sir." Drew had lied again without a blush.

Drew had hoped that Havershaw would pay him on the last day of the vacation. Indeed, he had counted on it. But he had been quick enough, in the sparring match into which the interview devolved, to evade the lawyer's more cruel jabs and, with that single inspired blow, rob his mentor of much of his advantage.

The lawyer did not like Drew Stalker. Few folk did, as it happened, but Havershaw's dislike stemmed from motives that, oddly, Drew would have upheld as right and proper if the shoe had been on the other foot. Havershaw disliked Drew because he had marked the boy as a social kangaroo and was, perhaps, a little afraid that *he* would be clouted by a clumsy foot as the lad leapt up the ladder of success.

"I am, ah, gratified to learn, Stalker, that you are not given to squandering your subsistence on, ah, tobacco, wine and the, aaahhh, pleasures of the flesh."

"I have more respect for myself, Mr. Havershaw."

"I am, ah, glad to hear it, Stalker."

God knows, the wine had been cheap, a penny per quarter bottle; two cheroots for the same sum and, probably, if he had scoured the stews long enough he might have found a woman willing to educate him in 'the pleasures of the flesh' for the same rifling amount.

Apparently Havershaw had heard rumours of his fondness for sampling the joys of the bottle and the tobacco jar, indulgences which went hand in glove with manliness through all ranks of society. Was the lawyer taking him to task, or merely warning him hat such spendthrift ways might mitigate against his success in he years to come? Drew had itched to petition Havershaw for a oan on his next quarter's grant. Logic, and pride, killed the mpulse. He had scored well by denying his need for more money. He could not now drop into an unsophisticated stance, even if it meant starving for a week or two. That was how his first jobbing vacation had ended, in an armed truce between lawyer and student.

By the end of September, however, Drew was beginning to regret his rash gesture of pride, to wish that he had a crown in lieu of satisfaction. He had already written home, a hopeful procedure now that Mirrin was not on hand in Blacklaw to spread her spiteful poison against him. Kate would see him right. He could depend on the family's weakness, their loyalty.

Cheered by his faith in Kate, Drew Stalker saw no reason to economise excessively and, as was his habit, continued to eat his evening meal in the *Cockerel* tavern — and let October take care of itself.

On the cobbled stoop of the Lawnmarket close to the dive of the West Bow the houses scrambled up in careless tiers like tattie boxes plastered together with pitch and buckram and roughly faced with stone. High lofts jutted precariously over the pavements and elongated ochre and coke-black chimney stacks protruded like mitten fingers through the uncertain slates. The whole conglomeration of Shannon's Close was perched on a row of porous wooden posts behind which shops and warehouses cowered in timid self-effacement as if they doubted their ability to withstand the tilt and would, some gusty night, shrug off their superstructures to a toss of wind from the Forth. In one of the attic summits Drew Stalker pored over his volumes of Scots Law and, occasionally, slept. Comparatively speaking, it was a fairly respectable lodging, though it shared in the general sleaziness which spread round the Castle Rock and the High Kirk of St. Giles.

A mile downhill towards Holyrood, tucked into Geddes Wynd, Drew had discovered the *Cockerel* tavern. It was conveniently close to his lodgings, to the Law Courts, and to the 'New' University on the South Bridge, and to Havershaw's High Street chambers. Unless the inclination took him, he had no need to travel beyond the confines of the Old Town. But the *Cockerel* had other advantages. Few students patronised it, and it was cheap and strident enough to provide an antidote to the arcadian stuffiness of the university and the isolation of his Shannon's Close attic. Within a month of his arrival, Drew regarded the tavern as his second home.

The *Cockerel's* alcoves were lit by sooty lamps clamped to ham-hooks in the brown brick walls. The uneven flagstones were strewn with butchers' sawdust. Furnishings consisted of solid rectangular tables and priory benches through which blowsy serving girls weaved their hazardous courses. Drew enjoyed the coarse repartee although, tucked away at a small table in a draughty nook far from the hearth, he took no part in it. Nursing his supper or tipple of wine, he remained an inconspicuous onlooker. When he became a lawyer no doubt he would have dealings with such folk. Studying them now, he tried to fathom motives for behaviour so irrational that no legal system in the world could take account of it.

Drew had another reason for patronising the 'cauld corner' of the *Cockerel*. Unwittingly he had attracted the attention of an admirer, a useful contact for a young man short of the readies.

The girl's name was Heather Campbell, a slightly-built Highlander of an age with himself. Heather's contribution to Drew's welfare came in the form of double helpings of shepherd's pie, stovies, broth and rice pudding. The high-handedness with which the student treated the serving lass — while graciously accepting her charity — only served to strengthen her conviction that Drew was somebody very special who would, some day, rise above squalor. Heather had been orphaned at the age of seven, a ward of the Inverness Parish Council who, in their wisdom, had judged her fit to earn her own living at the age of fifteen. As she was a personable, quiet-spoken girl, if not too robust, she had been earmarked for something out of the ruck of farm or parish work and duly 'found' to act as companion to an elderly lady who had need to make the arduous coach journey from Inverness to Edinburgh. Heather was assured that when she reached the capital, if she had performed her duties in a satisfactory manner, she would be given permanent employment as the lady's companion. It all sounded too good to be true — and it was.

The elderly lady's indisposition was the result of insatiable thirst. At every stop on the way south Heather had found herself involved in squabbles with the landlords of various inns. Once the lady had evaded her guardian completely and had run cackling into the bracken clutching a bottle under each arm. It had taken the entire coachload of passengers, plus crew, to winkle her from her lair and drag her, bawling boisterous ditties, back to the carriage. The experience had terminated in Edinburgh. The old lady had been whipped off by her daughter to a Home for Inebriates in Liberton, Heather being summarily discharged on the grounds of gross negligence.

Destitute and homeless, Heather had flinched from throwing herself on the mercy of the parish in this unfamiliar and frightening city. She had no desire to come under the thumb of another official body, to be treated like refuse again and swept quickly out of sight. She had been near to starving when she had chanced on the *Cockerel* and learned that the position of skivvy was, not surprisingly, vacant. At least she was assured of three shillings a week, a square meal a day and a mattress in the slum tenement adjacent to Geddes Wynd. She shared a cupboard-sized room on the back upper floor with four other working girls and received from them, in short order, a theoretic education in the ways of the world. It was remarkable that, up to the time she met Drew, her innocence had remained uncurdled, that she had not followed her companions' advice to find herself 'a chap or twa' to supplement her income.

It was immediately obvious to Drew that Heather Campbell's naïvety was mixed with self-pity, a forgivable quality however that had no trace of melodrama to it but rather a weird, prophetic, inimitably Celtic melancholy. She was safe enough from the *Cockerel's* seducers; too shadowy a presence to excite them, too skinny to appeal to bluff rogues in off the streets who preferred a sparkle in a girl's eye and a broad beam to occupy their knees.

That Heather liked Drew was patently obvious. He had remarked such behaviour in other girls, coyness and blushing which, in Blacklaw at least, soon had them tumbling into bed, with or without the benefit of a wedding ring. Pride had no place in his relationship with the servant. Until that evening, he had never deigned to explain his exact situation to her. As she approached to take his order, however, he saw in her a saviour and, for the first time, turned on the poor-lip in the hope of exploiting her sympathies.

He put a single penny on the board between his half-closed fists and, looking down at it, said, "That's all I have. What'll it buy?"

The frank admission of poverty had its expected effect.

Heather gave a little crooning groan.

"It's not even enough for a bowl of broth, is it?" He glanced up at her. Her eyes were round, her cheeks flushed. She looked, he thought, as if she might weep for him.

He waited.

The girl said, "I'll . . . see what I can do."

It took her an hour, piecemeal, to secure him the kind of supper that a healthy young man required. But in the end Heather supplied, at no charge, a brimming bowl of kail soup, a broken cob loaf, a plate heaped with potatoes and pork belly and a slice of currant cake which another customer had abandoned. She even managed to thieve him a short tipple of red wine to wash down the meal. Drew rewarded her by giving her more than a cursory glance.

She was not unattractive, really. Slender rather than skinny, her movements, as she threaded between the tables, light and graceful. He sipped his wine. He could not imagine what he had done to so stun this highland waif that she would risk her job to keep him fed — but he had no conscience about it. Until that evening, he had done nothing to invite her charity. She seemed to like being of service to him. Clearly, out of human decency, he ought to provide her with further opportunities — being careful to preserve his dignity, of course.

When Drew quietly suggested that he might walk her home to her lodgings when the tavern closed at midnight, Heather Campbell needed no second invitation. He waited for her at the mouth of the Wynd, standing in the shadows away from the lamps while buxom girls and their beaux for the night hurried, laughing and giggling, past him, and weazen wee men, pickled in whisky, reeled gently away over the cobbles to their nests. The Old Town of Edinburgh, pickled in history, seemed to stagger too, toddling uphill into the dry, cold sky. A skit of moonlight was caught in the cloven shadows of pots and turrets. A salt breeze whispered in from Leith and Portobello, Musselburgh and Aberlady, from the Bass Rock and the North Sea beyond, stirring the rubbish in the yard and neglected washing which still hung in pale hanks from the bows of the houses opposite.

Heather wore a man's flannel jacket, stitched up at the cuffs and tuck-sewn at the waist to make it fit at all. It swept away from her bodice and soiled skirts in a style that, in the wan moonlight, mimicked the fashions of those society ladies who were going in for rational dress that year. Drew bowed as she hesitantly approached and, from instinct, not courtship experience, took her hand and inserted it formally into the crook of his arm. He heard her catch her breath.

"Which way?" he asked.

"It's not far."

"That's unfortunate."

"Why do you say that?"

"It gives me less opportunity to talk to you, Heather."

It was the first time he had called her by name.

To cloak her confusion, she said, "It's that house, just there."

"Conveniently situated for the tavern, I see."

"Aye," the girl said, adding, "It's not much of a place. I don't earn much, you see."

They were strolling along the cobbles adjacent to the building in which Heather had her lodging. The night was still full of sly and stealthy sounds, perforated now and again by more raucous shouts or peal of laughter or the clatter of a post-chaise carrying some raffish gentleman in search of pleasure.

Drew was inclined to play the part of man-about-town. Common sense decided him against it. After all, he was cultivating this girl in the hope of obtaining free meals. Trading on her sympathies would serve his purpose best. He injected a certain wistfulness into his tone. "I don't earn anything at all, Heather."

"How do you live, then?"

"I . . . ah, I have an annuity which covers my tutorial fees, but apart from that . . ." Tactfully he stopped, too noble, too modest to burden her with his personal troubles.

Gratified, he felt her hand tighten on his arm; then, unexpectedly, his gratification was tinctured with another emotion, novel and not altogether pleasant. With less aplomb, he said, "Good of you to give me food tonight. First I've had for a couple of days, in fact. Keep me going for a week, it will."

"You've no money, Drew?"

Anxiety for his welfare caused her to use his name without embarrassment.

"A temporary state," Drew said, airily. "I'm used to making sacrifices for my career."

Heather said, "What is it you're studying at the university?"

"The Law," Drew answered, importantly.

The girl was so impressed that she could think of no further conversation for a moment.

Sighing, and patting her hand on his arm, Drew said, "Aye, the law: a damned hard taskmaster."

She stopped him gently, staring at him. He knew that he had impressed her. Whatever else happened in October, he wouldn't starve — not unless she was careless enough to be caught pilfering. He must advise her on that. Later, not now.

The girl said, "But you're not . . . not . . . ?"

Smiling, Drew said, "Not a gentleman, do you mean?"

"No, I . . . You're not like the other student gentlemen, Drew."

"My father is dead," Drew said. "My mother struggled to give me my opportunity. It was only at the insistence of my schoolmaster that I tried for a place on the faculty bench at all."

The girl smiled too, suddenly. "You'll not need to go hungry, Drew, not while I'm still in the kitchens."

"I can't allow that," Drew warmed. "It's dreadfully risky. Besides, I have some pride, you know."

"You can pay me back."

"How?"

"You can be my escort some nights, like this. See me safe to my house — that's if you want to."

"That isn't repayment," Drew said glibly. "That is a privilege an' pleasure."

The girl blushed and turned her head away so that her fair hair sung across her face, screening it.

"Now," Drew said, "it's late and you must be weary. Which house?"

"That one."

Drew led her across the cobbles into the pend. Externally, it was not so different from his own lodging but lower, older, more rank. Rats scuttled in the common middens which mounded up one corner of the yard. A fractured gas-mantle gave dim light to the scene. The breeze wheezed asthmatically in the closes and wynds and crankily rotated a chimney-cowl high, high overhead.

Heather loitered in a dark corner just under the arch from the street.

Drew hesitated. He knew — or thought he knew — what she expected of him. What disturbed him was not the gesture itself but the fact that he wanted to take her in his arms. Roughly, he tugged her towards him and slid his arm about her waist. He drew her closer than he intended, crushing her against him so that he could feel her breasts even through the bodice, pressing softly against him. Abruptly he was no longer in control.

Astonishment possessed him almost as much as hunger for the girl. Heather's hair was soft, her lips soft, the swelling of her breasts soft. At that moment, Drew wanted to hurt her for being more to him than he had ever intended. Confusedly he kissed her mouth, long, hard and unrelentingly, arms rigidly about her, her body pliant against his.

"It's . . . it's late: I m . . . m . . . must b'gettin' back now," Drew Stalker stammered. "I . . . I . . . I've got work t'do t'night: studies."

As he pivoted away from her, harried and anxious, she caught at his sleeve. Furiously he glanced back over his shoulder, the anger melting instantly at the tenderness in her eyes.

"Come tomorrow," she whispered. "Tomorrow night."

"Co . . . come where?"

"For your supper, Drew; to the tavern."

"Aye: yes: I'll do that," Drew Stalker promised and, without another word, hurried out into the cobbled street and, veering west, ran for the top of the town.

Wallace was no summer stallion, no russet-maned quality high-stepper with fetlocks like daffodil stems and a brisk gentlemanly nature. Wallace was three parts Clydesdale to one part Shire, with a stubborn streak that had ruined the temper of three ploughmen and four leathery carters in a mere decade of endeavour. Recalcitrance had reduced Wallace to the kind of bargain that Willie Kellock could not resist in spite of the fact that the bloody animal had champed the banknotes out of his fist even as he tried to pay the knacker for the privilege of hauling his purchase away.

Wallace was too healthy a lump of horseflesh to fall prematurely to the knacker's spike, too wicked a brute for much else. In that first night in his new home he had baptised his nice clean stable in the bakehouse yard with a sufficient quantity of urine to float a coal-barge and had hoofed a hole in the back planks large enough to admit the Northrigg band marching in column of route. But Willie admired spirit in men, women and four-legged animals and stuck to Wallace grimly. He finally reached an uneasy truce with the nag by pampering his manic fits and feeding him hugely on hay, choice oats, greenbite and the odd currant bun.

Maybe it was the buns that persuaded the stallion that he was better off bending a bit to the wee man's will than winding up as the filling in a batch of so-called mutton pies. For whatever equine reason, Wallace eventually allowed himself to be cajoled into the shafts of Kellock's van and coaxed into pulling the flimsy thing round the streets of Blacklaw. Wallace could even be bribed, with currant buns, of course, into standing still long enough for Willie to press a few sales before taking it into his head to look for a less draughty stance and clumping off without warning, leaving a shoal of protesting colliers and a trail of breadrolls scattered in his wake.

Flora Stalker, however, did not subscribe to bribery. She gave the huge iron-shod frosty-maned stallion no quarter in the campaign. In fact, Flora was not even aware that war had been engaged until the morning's run was almost over that first day of her employment, Monday, October second.

Flora had arrived early at the bakehouse to find Willie already easing his second batch of rolls from the ovens. With trepidation Willie had led the woman to the stable and, shielding her, had lifted the bar and opened the door. Wallace had remained passive, anticipating his usual breakfast treat. Instead of Willie heaving an oatbag or bond of hay, though, in strolled an empty-handed stranger, a big-boned female with a look in her eye that Wallace instantly distrusted. Being wily as well as truculent, he did not rebel at once. He bided his time, snorting a little when the woman buttered him up with the sort of phrases that wifies reserve for babies. In spite of her flattery, the woman paid him no serious attention as she lifted his collar from the stall hook and, on Willie's instructions, put it and all the leather and brass tack onto the horse.

Wallace restrained himself. He sized her up. It was her eye that he really didn't like. There was no temper in it, no trace of the wary baker's patience. It was like no eye Wallace had ever encountered, indifferent to his stature and reputation, suggesting that the woman thought of him as nothing more than a horse.

Still brooding, he was led from the stable and hitched to the cart. He looked back then, past the blinkers, along his bulging flanks, to observe the woman climb on to the seat in the cart's cowl which was usually reserved for the wee man. When he experienced the tug of the reins, Wallace realised that he had a novice on board. With a whinny of amusement, he pretended to obey her commands and went out of the yard like a lamb.

Plodding like some blown old dray-drudge, he swung right. That was the usual route; no positive guidance came through the leathers. Besides, the wee man was tramping along close to his crupper, alert for any sign of rebellion and toting, unusually, not a bag of buns but a barrel-slat heavy enough to indent even Wallace's well-tanned hide.

Mildly, Wallace pulled into the collar on the steepening hill, like so many of the giants of his breed who seemed to crave human approval and affection, past the *Lantern*, past the last of the rows. He stopped at the gates, watched them open and disgorge a shower of dirty colliers who made for the hatch in the tarpaulin, but steered wide of him as if he was a basketful of snakes and not just a poor humble old horse. He waited motionless, moved on when told, and waited again.

At the third halt Willie gave the woman some final instructions in cartmanship, and murmured advice — so Wallace couldn't hear — on how to cope with an emergency. Aye, an emergency! There would be a proper time and place for that, Wallace told himself. And he would pick both.

Willie Kellock returned to his bakehouse, leaving the woman in sole charge.

Wallace whinnied softly to himself.

High and mighty on her perch, the woman *cleeked* at him as if he was a pussycat. She waggled the reins. Obediently Wallace rounded the butt of the yard where stout sleepers made up the fencing. He went on between mounds of dross across the spur of the pit rails. He didn't even pretend to be frightened when a shunter whooped, a noise which usually provided him with an excuse to practise his lion rampant act and spill a few more bakings to crop up on the return journey.

Languorously Wallace clopped up to the row of ancient earth-coloured cottages on a flat of the hillside overlooking the pit workings. Here a clutch of old-biddy widows lived on the bounty of their families, a lazarette of discarded grannies who appreciated the convenience of Kellock's service and bought rolls and sweet things every morning as part of their planned communal economy. They were much surprised to see Flora Stalker — her that was Duncan's lass, and Alex's wife — sitting on the board, and kept her blethering a while. Wallace waited, his big belly rumbling, thinking not of reward but of revenge.

It was only when the woman had flapped the reins and he had brought the vehicle round and down the gradient towards the dirt patch that spread out from the rees where his hoofs would have grip and traction and no cobbles to skliff upon that Wallace elected to show his mettle — and ran away.

Gradually he picked up the pace. The cart bounced over muddy ruts, slithering on its clench. Flora sawed at the reins and shouted at her charge, ordering him to *Whoa*. Wallace snickered, filled his lungs with air, snapped his neck into the collar and let the pull of the hill take him. Churning the ground with his hoofs, he accelerated until he felt his mane flick out and the strap-tabs stiffen like oak. He passed the sleeper fence but did not wheel left. The shunter shrilled, in panic now, for Wallace, the woman and the cart shot under its buffer with only feet to spare.

Clinging to the reins, Flora's thick legs locked under the seat, feet splayed to hook into the wrought-iron struts. Behind her, under the tarp, rolls, loaves, pies, bridies and buns were hopping in confusion like peas on a hot griddle and spewing from the loosened hatch flap on to the ground. Her rump ached already. Her arms felt as if they were being torn from her shoulders. Her head shoogled forward and back. It was all she could do to keep herself from shutting her eyes to blank out the rush of the workings and the rise of palings which separated the backs of the miners' rows from the waste ground.

At any moment Flora expected to be hurled to the dirt and killed outright. Her past life danced before her eyes. She called out to Kate to save her. But there was no slackening, no idleness to encourage subconscious nostalgia. The fragments of her past were shaken and thoroughly dispersed as the stallion galloped into the sagging fence and trampled it flat on its rusty wires, forming a gap through which the van hurtled, leaping on to the rank grass sward.

Women were running out from the houses, bawling in fear, searching for their toddlers, snatching away the baskets in which their infants slept, though the runaway was past by that time. Wallace headed on through the strings of washing which draped the drying greens until he was caparisoned like a knight's charger in a jousting tournament, caped in sheets, stockings and shifts. A pair of navy-blue drawers flew from one ear.

Strangely, Flora's initial terror had diminished. She sensed perhaps that the horse was not mad, nor truly scared, and that his rampage was controlled enough to cause no damage to himself. Precariously she raised herself on the board and flung all her weight on the reins, canted backwards into the mouth of the tarpaulin tent which, swaying on its bindings, threatened to tear loose at any moment. A peculiar elation gripped her as, yard by yard, she felt the stallion weaken and hesitate, though the ride was far from over.

Women and men were pouring on to the grass which separated the rows, night-shift workers dragged from their beds to help avert disaster, the usual legion of adventurous bairns who had no more sense than to run in the cart's wake salvaging the cakes and pies which fell like manna from heaven. In a cloud of flour, Willie Kellock puffed into the backs, far up in the lane's end by the kirkyard wall. Barrel-slat in hand, he panted after his property as fast as his legs could carry him.

Wallace's tour of the cottages took in the entire length of the backs, a half mile or more down the arena of grass and stunted shrubs. He might have gone on past the rear of the Stalkers' house, out on to the tongue of moorland by Poulter's burn if he had been a few years younger and had less girth.

As it was, the horse suddenly called a halt to his flight. Slewing wide to give the woman at the reins a final lesson, he slammed the van broadside into a tangle of thorn bushes; then he stopped, braced to collect the brunt of the van's weight along the shafts. But, cushioned by the thorns, the van did not yield. After a quick peep to ensure that the woman had been discarded, Wallace bent his neck and nonchalantly nibbled the weeds as if nothing at all had happened.

On all fours Flora Stalker crawled from the rear of the van. Canvas was torn, trays broken, counter lids askew, the floor slanted so she had no need to lower the little wooden ladder to climb, sore and shaky, to the ground.

"Mrs. Stalker! Oh, Mrs. Stalker, are y'all right?"

"What a thing t'happen!"

"Flora, are y'hurt?"

Women who had not exchanged a civil word with her all summer long were solicitous now. Gathering in a wide circle, chary of coming too close to the wild brute that had done so much damage to the drying greens, they offered anxious condolences from a distance.

Flora leaned against the tail-board. She plucked a bridie from the neck of her dress. Could she trust her legs to carry her? Spots jigged in front of her eyes for an instant, but, when she inhaled, cleared away. In spite of throbbing muscles and jangled nerves, she experienced a vivid awareness of the world about her, a refurbishment of the all-too familiar environs of Blacklaw and, in that precise instant, a lurching strength. Danger, terror and triumph melted into conscious self-reliance. When Callum Ewing, first man on the scene and an old friend, tried to take her arm to lead her away, she shook him off.

"I'm . . . fine, Callum."

The old miner was clad only in shirt and trousers, braces dangling, feet bare. He peered into her face.

"Flora, come away t'our house and lie down."

Before she could reply, Willie Kellock broke through the ranks and waving his slat like a claymore, shouted, "Mrs. Stalker, how can I apologise enough. I'll kill that damned animal, so I will."

"Aye, you've a damned cheek sendin' an old woman out alone wi' that four-legged devil," Callum snapped.

The baker drew up as if shot. "I told her in advance what to expect, but she . . . she insisted."

"A bloody mad stallion," Callum retorted. "Should be put down, both you an' the horse, if y'ask me."

A chorus of agreement rose from the women and miners, though the men, by and large, were too interested in returning to their beds to become involved now that danger to life, limb and property was past.

Callum wagged his finger in Willie's face. "Bloody irresponsible, that's what it was."

"No harm done," said Willie, shrilly. "No harm done, though. You're not injured, Mrs. Stalker?"

"I'm fine, I tell you."

"Get rid o'that horse."

"I'll . . . I'll do that," Willie capitulated. He looked over at Wallace who, with ears pricked, pretended to crop the weeds. The baker lifted the stave threateningly and said, without genuine conviction, "I'll . . . eh, teach him."

"Wait," Flora said. "Leave the beast t'me."

The men stared at her.

She had composed herself, mouth firm, hair tucked back in place under the shawl, crumbs of ruined stock brushed from her dress. She put her hands on her hips.

"I suppose I'll get the sack now, Mr. Kellock?"

Willie hedged. "Well, no, I . . . I'll find you other work, Mrs. Stalker, that's the least I can do."

"I should bloody think so," Callum added.

"And the van?" asked Flora.

"I'll . . . I'll have to give that up."

"That's what I thought you'd say."

Without another word, Flora walked past the men, down the side of the couped cart and the stallion's flanks. She stripped off remnants of clothing which still draped him and threw them aside, then placed herself in front of him so that, blinkered or not, the horse could not help but notice her. Wallace raised his head until his face slowly came level with the woman's. Before he could even think about another tantrum, she caught him by both ears and held his head like a sack of barley, steadying his muzzle and compelling him to look her straight in the eye.

Of course, Wallace did not understand what he saw there.

It is doubtful if a man could have fathomed the depths which lay below the authority of the Stalker woman's gaze, the hurts and the healings, the bone-hard will developed in youth, tempered by the sufferings, large and small, of life in a pithead village. It was all in her gaze now, an indifference to something as banal as a wilful horse, something as transient as the physical pain he had caused her, a fleabite beside the real wounds of grief and loneliness which she had endured and survived.

Wallace read none of this. But she informed him by that fixed stare, that she had only contempt for him, scorn for the thought that he could dissuade her from her purpose. When he had the temerity to snuffle and chaffer and try to lift his head, she thumped him on the muzzle. Not a savage blow, it was pronounced enough to assure him that *she* was the boss and *he* the servant in the circumstances which had thrown them together. He was nothing but a Clydesdale, and he had better not forget it again.

Flora released the ears.

The stallion remained as still as a monument in chastened acknowledgment of her superiority.

Flora said, "Pull that van out of the bush, an' straighten it up.

Mr. Kellock, would you be good enough to check the fastenings?"

"But . . . ?"

"If you will, please."

Callum Ewing grinned, "Do as she says, Mr. Kellock."

The old collier had often wondered how much of her husband's fighting spirit had rubbed off on Flora. Now he had an answer. It happened that way with some women, a late flowering of an independence that they never knew they possessed. He had no need to worry about Flora Stalker any more.

Rounding up help, Callum Ewing put his shoulder to the wheels and righted the van in minutes.

Alone, Flora Stalker climbed into the cowl and seated herself square on the bench. Ashen beneath his flour coating, Willie handed her the reins. She flicked them, waking Wallace from his trance, and tugged right to lead his head round.

As she drove the bakehouse cart slowly up the drying greens, the citizens of Blacklaw cheered. Flora smiled to herself. She was no longer afraid.

The bad-tempered horse had been broken and, it seemed, much else besides. She felt that she could face the prospect of the rest of her life now with equanimity.

The wind had changed. Skating down from the north, it caused the Blacklaw folk to huddle deeper into their threadbare overcoats and dig out their scarves and gloves for darning. In the early morning greasy ice slicked the main street's cobbles. Weather-sages grumbled that it was too soon for frost and that the winter in consequence would be severe. Flora Stalker was of that opinion and, Kate reflected, her mother wasn't often wrong these days.

Kate pulled the shawl round her ears and tucked the little parcel under her arm. In the parcel were three squares of sliced sausage, three rounds of black pudding and a scrag-end of mutton. The butcher's bill had been cheap — as life itself, so Kate thought, was cheap in this sad, black village. Only her mother, of all the elders of Blacklaw, seemed happy these days.

A weird transformation had come over Mam since she had found work at the bakery and, even more odd, since her fracas with Kellock's horse. The incident had caused laughter in the village but Kate could only shiver in horror at the thought of how close to tragedy the Stalker family had sailed again. Mam could have been killed or maimed, then what would she — Kate — have done? She *could* do no more. The effect of that wild charge had been a tonic to Flora, however. She defended the awful stallion now the way some colliers defended their scrawny whippets, talking of Wallace as if he was nothing but a big unruly lad.

Worry, Kate thought, was becoming a habit. Close consideration of their current circumstances showed that the Stalkers had little to fret about, not compared with previous years or the state some of their neighbours were in. They had free tenancy of the narrow house. Together they were pulling in a wage totalling more than one hard-working miner could extract from Lamont in a week's graft at the face. For all that, Kate fretted. She picked at the prospect of disasters that *might* befall them, vague fears for Mirrin and Drew and Betsy, though all three, and Mam, seemed more than able to take care of themselves.

"God, Kate, you look right down in the mouth."

The speaker had been leaning against the wall of the public house. Kate had hardly noticed him as she approached. He pushed himself away from the brick and, taking his hand from his pocket, caught her shoulder. The gentleness that had once been in Rob Ewing's touch was gone. There was an almost desperate anxiety in his grasp, as if he needed assurance that she wouldn't spurn him. As if she would! In spite of his quarrel with Mirrin, Rob Ewing had always been her friend. She hadn't seen him for months, though, not since the early summer in fact. Though the village was small and both worked at the pit, the division of shifts and — with the drawing in of the community's belt — the absence of social events had kept them apart. Kate had no interest in politics, Rob Ewing's hobbyhorse until his marriage to young Eileen McMasters back in the spring, a marriage which, through no fault of the bride or groom, had rapidly turned sour.

It was Sunday morning, early. Chapel bells clanged for mass, the sound drifting forlornly over frost-white fields. It would be three hours yet before the kirks wakened the sparrows in their towers, and colliers' families, those who still professed faith in God, would troop out into the streets in sober, mothball-reeking Sabbath garb and make for their chosen place of worship, the Church of Scotland, the Baptist, or the tin shed that served the

Evangelical Society, a livelier, if more demanding Christian band.

Though it was frowned upon by the 'unco guid' the village shops sneaked open for a spell on early Sunday morning and the *Lantern* would unlock its doors to a 'registered clientele' from one o'clock until two-thirty. Rob could hardly be waiting for the pub to open.

Kate said, "How's Eileen now, Rob? Stronger, I hope?"

"Aye," Rob said, still holding Kate. "The doctor seems pleased with her progress."

"You're . . . out early," Kate said, tentatively.

"Fresh air," said Rob.

"Walk down with me an' I'll make us some tea."

Rob hesitated, then nodded.

His bluff boyishness was gone now. His blond hair was as lank as his ungroomed moustache. His high colour — more suited to a farmer than a miner, Mirrin used to say — had paled to fishbelly grey. He had lost much weight. Of an age with Kate, almost to the month, he looked much older now. She wondered if she appeared as haggard to him.

"Have they indicated what the trouble is?" Kate asked. "With Eileen, I mean?"

Kate had heard rumours, some of them nasty, about young Eileen Ewing's affliction. The girl had lost a baby in the third month and had been a semi-invalid since. There were many questions that Kate wanted to ask Rob. Mam had had news from Callum, Rob's father, for the old collier still came about the house to do small chores for the women. But Callum, normally forthright and frank, was defensive about his daughter-in-law's illness and pooh-poohed the Stalkers' concern.

Rob released Kate's shoulder. "Aye, I would like a cup o'tea," he said, leaping her question about Eileen's health.

It pained and embarrassed him to talk of it. Many miners considered that there was shame in sickness, a lack of the innate strength which was the boast of every working man. Kate let the subject lapse and conversation as they walked on down the hill was disjointed. Rob's troubles eroded the communion between them, and they scratched for common interests.

Rob said, "Goin' to the kirk later?"

She shook her head. "Are you?"

Rob said, "For what? To be told about Heaven? I've little enough credulity left, Kate, but what I have I'll save for believin' in a better world here on earth."

This bitterness was new in Rob. It mirrored her own disillusionment.

Rob laughed mirthlessly. "John Kerr thinks paradise is t'be found in America."

Jumbled snippets of information regarding the huge continent on the far side of the Atlantic had come to Kate through items in the *Hamilton Advertiser*. It did not strike her as paradise, though maybe it was manly enough to appeal to youngsters like Johnny Kerr — and even to staid Rob Ewing.

"Is he going?" Kate asked.

"He's savin' for the passage. He wants t'farm."

"Farm?"

"But he's got a job open," Rob sneered. "A job in a Pennsylvanian coalmine. Does the stupid bugger not see that he'll be trapped there just like he's trapped here?"

"Maybe you're wrong, Rob."

"It's not wrong." Rob spat on the pavement. "He'll never work on a bloody farm. He'll die wi' a lamp in his hand just like those of us who stay home."

Kate was dismayed at the change in Rob. He had valid reason for bitterness, for hating the colliery. Not only was his wife ailing, but Callum too was ill, a victim of anthracosis caused by inhaling coaldust year after year. It was a major cause of death among miners, more damaging, though less dramatic, than accidents. She'd seen sufferers — two out of every five men above the age of forty — gasping for breath, hawking up phlegm so filthy that it didn't seem possible for the human system to contain it. It had been inevitable, Kate supposed, that Callum would fall heir to colliers' blight: her father too would have contracted it if he'd lived. It was part of the price of survival, of living longer than one should. She had no need to press Rob for details. The insidious nature of anthracosis was all too familiar. Callum would work for another six months or a year before the strain told on his heart, then he would be dismissed to become a ward of his son's charity, a wheezing, choking cripple fit only to crawl from the bed to the fireside chair until he was strangled by black dust clogging his lungs. A year ago Kate would have wept for Callum Ewing; now she regarded such happenings as the starch which stiffened the loose and shapeless fabric of village life.

When they reached the door of the Stalkers' house, Rob paused. He looked up at the attic window where Drew had once burned his candle far into the small hours.

"I . . . I won't come in after all, Kate," Rob said. "I'd better get home. Eileen wearies for my company."

"What is it?" Kate asked once more. "Can't you tell me what's wrong?"

"A thing called angina," Rob said. "Her heart's damaged. It was an illness she had when she was a child. Carrying the baby, I suppose, brought it back."

"I'm sorry, Rob. She'll maybe be all right."

"Aye, as long as she rests. No . . . no excitement. No bairns, Kate," Rob said. "At nineteen, she's finished as a wife."

Kate touched his arm. "You shouldn't . . . "

"Shouldn't what? Shouldn't say things like that: give up hope of a miracle or face up to facts. It's the truth, though, Kate, an' I'm man enough t'acknowledge it. I should've heeded Mirrin. I should not have married. I should've packed it in here and set out for a cleaner country."

"In America?" said Kate quizzically. "In Pennsylvania, maybe?"

"Have you heard from Mirrin?"

"Not lately."

"Where is she?"

Kate shrugged. "I'm not certain. In the Borders, I think."

"Happy t'be shot of this dungheap, I'll wager."

"Mirrin can look out for herself."

"Aye," Rob said. "I must go, Kate."

"Give my love to your father an' your wife."

Rob nodded curtly. "An' if you hear from Mirrin," he said, "be sure t'pass on my . . . fondest regards."

"I will," Kate lied. She would not mention Rob to Mirrin. The collier was married now and must, like the rest of them, shoulder his burden without the illicit pleasure of harking back to what might have been.

Five

Thick and glutinous clay clung to Mirrin's arms and oozed under her fingernails. It dobbed boots and makeshift leggings so heavily that the tinks shuffled up the drills with a ponderous mechanical gait that quickly wearied them. Steered by Mag Marshall, the tinker clan had drifted south out of Ayrshire and on over the Scottish-English border, picking up a day's hire here and there, turning between whiles to the traditional winter chores of collecting old clothes, weaving baskets and peg-making. Now, though, it was turnips, three large fields, the last farm job liable to be undertaken by the collective tribe for the year.

The weather had broken a fortnight ago, a week into October. Rain rolled off the Cumbrian Mountains traced with sleet in the dawn rising. All the turnips had already been unearthed, topped and tailed by men wielding sharp crooked knives. The soil was too wet to bear farm carts and the womenfolk filled hemp-sacks which they lugged or dragged to the hard pad by the gate where the carts waited, and the horses stood drenched and dejected.

Mirrin winced as her sodden sleeves sawed into her chafed and bleeding wrists. She had clapped a poultice of mud on a wound on the palm of her hand and covered it with a mitten. Even so, it impeded the rhythm of the task so much that she had fallen behind the line and had to scramble to make up ground along the drill. Tossing the neeps hurriedly into the sack, she missed sometimes and was cursed for carelessness, cursed with a vituperative foulness that would have made the coarsest collier flush. Tom had been right. How could she ever have thought that travellin' folk carried an aura of romance? "You only need t'look at their faces to see how tough it is being a tinker," Tom had said. Now she believed him.

The rawness of her wrists and the throbbing ache in her back compelled her to ease and stretch.

Old Mag's voice flayed her. "Keep it up, Stalker. This's no easy pit darg. Ye've no time t'coddle yoursel'. Bend yer back t'it. We want them neeps all carted afore dark."

Mirrin clenched her teeth. Gathering a load of muddy turnips, she staggered to the sack. Awkward still, she held the mouth of the sack with hand and knees and toppled the vegetables into it, spilling more than she filled. Mag snarled at her again. Into the ragged hedges the scarecrow figures merged, stooping and straightening. Crows craked and cawed as if jeering the labourers. Mirrin was cold, sore and bored. God, she was no better off here than she would have been at the troughs in Blacklaw. There at least she had mastered the simple rhythm of the work and had no cantankerous old bitch to slave-drive her on. She was hungry too. Breakfast had been meagre, a puddle of gruel and a stale end of bread, not even tea. The girl-child in charge of the pot had let the fire go out, and had been beaten for her carelessness.

She shouldered the lumpy sack and plodded fifty yards with it to the cart. She hoisted it up the front of her body, for the board of the slope-sided cart was high. A farmhand took it, swung it, expertly scattered the neeps on to the growing pile then, without a word, flung the sack back at her. As she returned to the line of bruised-blue turnips, the rain began again.

The last hour of the afternoon's field-finishing was an almost unendurable agony of wet skirts, stiffening muscles and skinned flesh. There was no banter among the tinks, no songs, no jokes. They worked soundlessly, mindlessly, toiling along the clay drills in the steady grey rain. Then it was over and dusk congealed in the cloud over the mountains, thickening too, like slate dust paste, sending rooks and crows to roost noisily in distant trees.

The camp was on the far side of the farm. On a patch of stony ground by the river the tents had been slung up in the half-dark two days ago to see them through a couple of nights, no more. Tomorrow or the next day, the clan would divide and fork back over the border into Scotland, some strays heading for a good site near Annan and others, Mag's special tribe, veering away into

Galloway to brazen out the winter on a cold and isolated shore.

The tinks herded behind the swaying cart like cattle.

The near-side wheel of the cart jarred on the ridges causing the turnips to shift in a landslide that brought shouts of warning from the farmhand, as vegetables dislodged and fell to the ground.

"Keep the bloody wheels to the sides," a tink yelled. "Look out, or the lot's awa'."

As Mirrin stepped back from the rumble of turnips which cascaded over the backboard, she was pushed violently from behind.

"Give it room, me Mam says," rapped Colly Marshall imperiously. "You, Stalker, get out the bliddy way."

Colly pushed her again, her forearm striking Mirrin across the breast. Colly's ugliness was accentuated by a peevish, dictatorial expression and ratstails of red hair. "Out t'way: out t'way, me Mam says."

She had no call to single out Mirrin for abuse. It was malicious, trivial and maddening. When Colly shoved her again, driving her from the track into the tall splashing grasses, Mirrin caught her by the wrist, dragged her out of balance and swung her vigorously into the verge. Behind them, the parade stopped abruptly. Still dribbling neeps the cart lurched on.

Mirrin drew back from the sprawling girl.

"Sorry, Colly," she said, with a degree of sarcasm that even the dim-witted tink could not fail to recognise.

Colly pushed herself up, face scarlet with temper and humiliation. She had no desire to tackle the collier's daughter there and then, however.

"*Mam?*"

Mirrin turned to follow the cart.

"You."

Mag Marshall stepped out from the tinkers' ranks.

"What?" Mirrin refused to flinch from the old woman's fierce authority.

Reaching, Mag dragged a sack from a woman's head, whipping it away with sufficient force to cause the woman to cry out and stumble. Mag hurled the sack at Mirrin. "You, pick up the spillin's."

Mirrin hesitated. It was a punishment: she knew that. The tinks had already begun to gather the fallen neeps, one or two to each. Now she had been told to sack and lug them all. She looked up the track at the retreating cart, at the twenty or thirty turnips scattered like huge seeds in its wake. The farm buildings were a good quarter of a mile off. It was a hard and tiring task that Mag had allotted her, especially at the end of such a gruelling day. Mirrin's cheeks flushed. She was tempted to pick up one of the neeps there and then and bounce it off the old hag's skull. Instead, aware of the eyes trained on her, Mirrin tossed her head and scooping up the front of her skirt to tuck into her waist-belt, said, "Right! If you lot are too lazy t'finish the job, I'll do it. Now get on, if you will, please, before you all sink int' the mud."

Colly struggled out of the verge. Perhaps she expected her mother to attack Mirrin physically, to thrash the girl for such obvious defiance. But the matriarch was too crafty. She had issued an order which the collier's bitch had accepted. The fact that the girl had agreed with cheerful willingness drew the sting out of the punishment.

Whistling, Mirrin was already scooping up the vegetables and popping them into the sack. The cart was out of sight over the hill by now but, as far as she could judge, the neeps had settled and no more tumbled to the ground.

"On wi' ye, then," Mag Marshall shouted.

The tinks shifted, splitting round the fallen turnips, trudging on, faster now down the sides of the track. Still whistling loudly, with an ebullience she did not feel, Mirrin bent to her picking. It would cost her two trips to the farm and back. Needless labour. Glancing up briefly, she saw Tom striding back down the track towards her. Behind him, Colly and Mag Marshall stopped, watching. As he reached her, already grabbing for the sack, Mirrin said, "Don't get involved, Tom. Mag won't approve."

"To hell with her," Tom retorted. "I do as I please."

Mirrin snorted. "Then sing."

"What?"

"You heard me, Tom Dandy. Let's hear your lovely voice in song."

Strong in volume, but tuneful, Mirrin struck into 'My Lad's a Canny Lad'. Her solo was augmented, after a pause, by Armstrong's tenor.

The song helped. Songs always helped.

Throughout that last dismal hour of the October afternoon, the couple wended their way through a whole repertoire of familiar melodies. It was after dark before they tramped into Mag Marshall's camp by the flooded stream, still hoarsely blending their voices in 'The Bold Irish Navvy'.

"It'll not do t'lose your temper again, Mirrin," Tom warned. "She'll not stand for it."

"Then let her whistle," Mirrin retorted. "I'll not be chased out."

"God, but you're stubborn."

"If I'm right, though, *you're* ready t'leave."

"Near enough," Tom admitted.

They were seated on a coconut mat under the eaves of the tent back, a tiny private canvas sanctuary where Tom made his bed away from the stink of the communal hut where the rest of the men and boys slept, those who hadn't women or wives to bundle in their blankets. The women's tent crouched low and black in the flicker of light from the cooking fires. The smell of stew rose with the belching smoke from the rusty canister that served as a chimney. It was hardly a homely place, squalid and unstable like many of the tinks and their relationships. She could hear squabbling within the tents, a man and his mistress slanging each other with a shrillness that indicated hatred. Over by the bushes, two small boys were pummelling a third and making him howl, while four or five dogs snuffled curiously around or barked at the fray.

"Are you for comin'?" Tom asked.

"What are you offering me now, Tom Dandy?"

"We'll find something."

"We're better off here."

"I won't ask again, Mirrin," Tom said. "It's now or never."

"Now or never," said Mirrin. "I didn't imagine that the word 'never' had a place in your vocabulary. Where's your fight, Tom? Are you all jingle, like the medals on your hat?"

"Maybe you've more of the tink in you, Mirrin Stalker, than I have. If your length in a stinkin' tent and a scoop of greasy stew is as much as you want, then you're welcome to it. It won't do me much longer."

"I'm lookin' for something, Tom," Mirrin said, more seriously than before.

"What, for instance?"

"I don't know m'self, to tell the truth," Mirrin answered. "A point, a purpose, I suppose."

"You've been with the tribe long enough t'know that you'll not find it on the road."

"The road's all I have at the moment," Mirrin said.

"Go back home."

"That I'll not do."

"Then come with me: I'll help you find what you're lookin' for."

"Even if it's security?"

"I'm in no mood t'argue, Mirrin."

"Don't argue, then, Tom, just talk."

"I've done enough talkin'."

"Aye, I have too."

"Goodnight t'ye, then," Tom said.

"Tom?"

"Goodnight."

He rolled away from her and slid through the flap of his tent. She heard the scuff of knuckles on canvas as he tied up the ropes which kept out the worst of the wind. He lit no light. She sensed somehow she had insulted him again.

What was it he'd said: she was more of a tink than he was. She could understand the treadmill slavery of the tinkers' round now. It was true: she would not find what she sought in a brawling gypsy encampment. Now that she thought of it, she hardly knew the others. She had clung to Tom, lumping the rest of the tribe, with one or two exceptions, into an anonymous cluster of faces, classed by age and sex, but without other identification. They had no names, no real identities; not like the colliers of Blacklaw, all of whom were stamped with an individuality that made them unique even in the closed world of the pithead village.

Tom was right. The travelling folk — at least this tribe of them — were devoid of romance or glamour. Their pride was personified in the selfish bigotry of Mag Marshall, their self-appointed queen.

She hesitated. She could call on him now. She felt sure he would gladly admit her to his tent. It would be a good time to seal the bargain. Though she was attracted to him, however, she was still filled with the memories of the winter past and of the meaning of giving herself to a man, in love not out of whim.

Shifting quietly, she rose and walked round to the hut. It was silent now, the families gathered on the grass under a draped awning where the men had lit themselves a fire and there was food and a bottle or two of ale to swill it down. Pots cooked in the fire in the women's hut had been taken out. The entire tribe gathered like shadows, animate and somehow pathetically sly in their huddle under the belly of the primitive shelter.

Stooping, Mirrin went into the hut to unearth her 'coggle', the tin bowl into which her portion of the meal would be splashed. She must hurry or the ravenous youngsters would scrape the pots before she got there.

On hands and knees in the low smoke-wreathed interior she groped for her bedroll. She was all tink at that instant, her mind empty of everything but anticipation of the warmth the stew would bring to her stomach and the laziness that would accompany digestion in the stuffy hut, a passivity which would blot out all inclination to trouble her mind with tomorrow.

As she straightened, bowl and spoon in hand, the steel pin, whetted needle sharp, touched her jugular vein.

Instinct warned Mirrin not to flinch. She moved nothing but her eyes. The sensation of the pin, though she could not see it, brought up the image of Mag's favourite weapon, a horned brooch which stuck out of her withered red braids like the bone in a cannibal's nose.

Mag Marshall's voice, as thin and dangerous as the eight-inch pin, hissed venomously in Mirrin's right ear.

Mirrin said softly, "Is it yourself, lady?"

The challenge of daring to speak at all was not lost on the tinker mother. The point of the pin wormed into Mirrin's flesh, extracting a drop of blood. The old woman's dexterity was a sure indication of her expertise with the weapon. Mirrin was afraid.

"Just a wee word t'the wise," Mag whispered. "Ye can go or ye can stay as you've a mind, me lass. I'm not the one to hive off a good worker, an' that ye are, I will admit. But shy clear o' Tom Armstrong. He's not for you nor the likes o'you. He's for my Colly, the love. She'd have had him for sure this summer but for you interferin'. Let the man bed ye an' be done with it, if ye must. I know how the blood simmers in that feller for a fresh thing like yersel'. But when that's done, he'll come back t'me an' my Colly. I'm tired of waitin' while you string him along with your prissy ways."

"And if I don't?"

"I'll prick out yer eyes," Mag said.

"And the law will take you?"

"Law? What law is there but me? Accidents can happen t'anyone, an' I have a dozen witnesses t'back me story up."

"Has Tom no say at all?"

"Tom Dandy's a daft feller, idle enough t'be trapped."

Before she could resist, Mirrin was caught by the throat and swung round. She peered into the old woman's evil face, at the sharp steel needle which hovered in front of her eyes, ruby light from the dying fire like blood smeared down its length. Mag's claw-like hands held her, though she would not have dared to resist.

"He'll court, bed an' wed my Colly," the old tink said. "That'll be the way o'it, with you out o'the way. Bear it in mind, Stalker."

Mag Marshall released her and slithered backwards out of the hut before Mirrin could break the spell that the pin's proximity had cast on her, a mesmerism born less out of fear of the old woman's threats than from the inherent dread of being condemned to a life of total darkness by her unwitting involvement in a mean and trivial plot to find a mate for her ugly daughter.

Raucous laughter floated in from the campfire. She touched her neck with her fingertips and looked at the tiny bloodstains. She was afraid; not racked by terror, though. The woman was not mad. She had been given a choice. Provided she did exactly as Mag Marshall commanded she would come to no real harm. But *would* she do what the tink wished. Her obstinate pride was every bit as intractable as the woman's. She realised that she had played a game with Tom, a game as destructively flighty as her sister Betsy's cruel teasing of Dalzells' clerks, but in a circle where such silliness could turn back against her. Even so, she would not capitulate to threats.

Lifting bowl and spoon Mirrin backed out of the hut into the damp night air. Walking straight and light as if she had no cares in the world, she headed for the awning, the pots, and the bosom of the tinker family.

Defiance was all she had left. And Tom Armstrong's protection.

The group taking the air between lectures in the university quadrangle was larger than usual and Drew Stalker was able to insinuate himself into it without being rebuffed by imperious stares and cutting remarks. Drew longed to be accepted by the McAlmond côterie, that premier 'club' whose members displayed all the privileges of wealth, status and fine breeding.

Fraser McAlmond, linch-pin of the circle, was a natural leader of the young bucks. Reputed to be richer than any other student, he certainly had the aloof, handsome bearing of a fellow born to the manor. The truth was that the McAlmonds' first land in Perthshire had been purchased with cash earned by prudent investment in railway stock and, through a bachelor uncle, heavily subsidised by the profits of brewing cheap beer. Fraser's sire, Archibald, had been sufficiently perspicacious to hive off direct connections with 'crude trade' and as soon as practical had married into the aristocracy as an additional means to his end. Isabel Harriet, youngest daughter of Sir Gilbert Oakley, had dutifully supplied Archibald with three sons. She had also raised his station from that of brewery-rich speculator to 'laird' of the policies of Pearsehill, a miniature baronial estate which just happened to adjoin the few hundred acres of hill pasture and mixed forest that Archibald had bought a couple of years before the marriage. There were many other McAlmond holdings and investments, all snug and secure, tinkling out the baw-bees to plough into those fine Perthshire fields, to spend lavishly on the ornamentation of Pearsehill House and the consolidation of a position of inviolate respectability.

Ronald McAlmond, Fraser's elder brother, had been earmarked for the lairdship since birth. It was felt, however, that it would do no harm to actually have a lawyer in the family, to take the business away from Gow Havershaw. For that simple reason Fraser had been directed to qualify as a solicitor and, eventually, have himself called to the bar. His success as a star pupil of Fettes College had largely depended on personal magnetism and prowess with bats and balls of various shapes and sizes. Now, however, Fraser

McAlmond was in process of discovering that money and influence carried little weight in the Faculty of Law. Pater could not purchase answers to the learned professors' questions or influence the marking of the term class papers. Besides, Fraser had always been far more interested in girls, gaming and carousing than in books. It had just begun to occur to him that failure was possible, indeed virtually assured, without a high degree of application to scholastic rather than sensual pursuits.

Little of his uncertainty showed on the surface. Outwardly Fraser was as swaggeringly assured as ever, lording it over his cronies, including Hector Mellish and the foppish twins, Balfour and Innes Sprott.

That dinner hour Balfour Sprott was recounting in graphic detail his amorous adventure with his aunt's second parlour maid, an exploit which, though not crowned with ultimate success, had paved the route for final conquest next time he spent the weekend in the lady's house in Cupar. The others in the group endeavoured — by 'haw-hawing', by winks and nudges — to convey the impression that they too had gobbled up many a young parlour maid in their time.

Drew Stalker could also have joined the bragging. But it was no part of his plan to try to cap the roués. He cared little enough for the approval of Mellish and the Sprotts. It was McAlmond's friendship he coveted. Consequently during the boasting it was McAlmond's eye he sought. If Fraser appeared bored, so did Drew. If Fraser composed a witticism, Drew smiled appreciatively. If Fraser cracked a joke, Drew laughed.

Initially Drew thought that it was all to no account, that the blond young man was wrapped up in himself to the exclusion of all else; but, as the boys' invention flagged on the subject of women and the conversation turned to argument on points of law, Drew saw his chance. He was too cautious to enter the lists, for he could have slain any or all of the lordlings in debate. Instead, when McAlmond made a hit, Drew chuckled and nodded in agreement as if the banal comment had been a masterpiece of profundity. Fraser's glance brushed over the scruffy upstart and, for the first time, he graced Stalker with a speculative smile. Drew was careful not to press his advantage at once. McAlmond was no fool. He would not entertain toadies. He had enough of those already.

Comradeship was what Drew Stalker sought. On that early winter's day, he received his first hint that he might soon achieve his aim.

Life in the capital had brightened considerably. Kate had sent on the six shillings, together with a crabbit wee note to the effect that Mam and Betsy wished him well. Betsy had also written to him, separately, pleading for news of Edinburgh and of 'his progress'. He would send her a card on November 1st, when his next quarter's grant fell due. He did not intend to alienate his pretty twin sister, not now that he had an idea as to how she might be of use to him. As for Kate — he did not care whether she approved of him or not. He was finished with Blacklaw. He could not imagine himself ever returning to that black hole — unless, of course, Houston Lamont sent for him. So far he had had no personal contact at all with his patron, an arrangement that suited Drew well enough under the circumstances.

Of all the favourable developments that the late autumn brought, however, his discovery of Heather Campbell and his enjoyment of her was by far the most important — at least for the first half dozen nights.

As he had suspected the girl was so stupid that she gave herself to him almost at first asking. Though he had not been suave as he would have wished, he had turned his awkwardness into a plea for pity, a ruse which worked spectacularly well. Out of sympathy for his loneliness, the highlander had allowed herself to be coaxed to the truckle bed and, after some hugging, kissing and similar demonstrations of affection, she had surrendered to the urgency of sexual desire, an emotion that seemed to possess the girl almost as much as it did Drew.

At its raging height, that phase lasted only a fortnight. By then, Heather had spent nine nights in Drew's bed. She left for the *Cockerel* at the same time as he left for first class, the pair of them sneaking down the winding open stair, past the sentry-box doorway of the apartment where the lodging-house keeper lived and out of which she spied upon her tenants. That Drew had so far avoided conflict with this harridan, a Mrs. Sankey, spoke well of the fortune that favours young lovers. He had, of course, several glib lies prepared to placate the old dragon if ever she should challenge him with morally degrading her pension.

So Heather Campbell came and went freely enough. Her companions in the billet at the nether end of Geddes Wynd thought nothing of her night-long absences. They tweaked and chivvied her bawdily about them, giving her more respect now that she had shed her virtue and sunk a little closer to their level.

Once he had tasted fulfilment, however, Drew Stalker found the highland girl irritating. He had no patience with her meek requests for loving attentions. As a buffer against her dependence on him — and the possibility of his own weakening — Drew perpetrated all sorts of humiliations upon her. He criticised her lack of education, her modesty, her accent, her acceptance of her lowly station, twisting and turning his remarks cunningly so that the girl remained almost constantly confused and pliant. Perhaps — he thought later — he had tried to drive her from him, had sought to give her strength enough to walk out and never associate with him again. If so, he had misjudged her need of him. Not until long after, did it occur to Drew Stalker that he was all the girl had had in the world.

Six

ANGRY SHOUTING WAKENED Mirrin. She wallowed into the swaddle of old coats that kept out the damp of the October morning. She could tell by the light under the edge of the tent that it was barely dawn yet and that the day, like yesterday, was wet. She listened to the outraged sounds, indifferent to their meaning. Some tink lad had perhaps been found with a girl of the tribe, or an act of petty theft discovered by an early riser. Dogs yapped. The noises came closer, then, before she was properly awake, she felt the whole tent shake. Clawing hands stripped the blankets from her and dragged her by the ankle from the mattress.

Struggling, Mirrin saw Mag Marshall bent over her. The woman's features were contorted by fury, her eyes livid with hatred. Behind the matriarch Colly's moon-face was swollen with tears.

"*Slut! Penny whore. Get out o'me camp, d'y'hear?*" Mag shouted.

Wriggling, Mirrin reached and broke the woman's vice-like grip and plunged forward out of the tent on to the wet grass. She was still bewildered, afraid of the threat of steel pin, but her anger was also roused. Whatever her crime, Mag did not intend to keep it secret. The rest of the tribe were crawling from their beds to observe the proceedings with interest.

"*Brazen bitch!*" Colly wailed. "*She done it, the sow.*"

"What have I done, then?" Mirrin leapt to her feet as the old gypsy rushed from the tent.

"Tom's gone," Colly snivelled.

"Aye, an' it would be you that arranged it," Mag said. "Arranged it between ye, like as not, since ye knew he was for Colly."

"Gone?" said Mirrin. "Tom's gone where?"

"Dinna act the innocent wi' me," Mag yelled. Fumbling at her bodice she unclipped the pin which held the brooch to her bosom. Her hair was unbraided, tousled, bristle-stiff around her head like a reddish grey mane. "Ye devised it between ye."

"How can you b'sure he's gone?"

"See, see for yersel'."

Glancing to her left Mirrin saw that Tom's small tent had vanished. There was no sign of it, save a yellowish patch of grass, a broken peg and some chicken bones on the ground. Fear and a sudden sense of loss shook Mirrin for an instant. She was almost caught off guard by the old woman's savage attack.

As the brooch pin jabbed at her face, Mirrin ducked. She reached out and, as she had learned to do in scraps with colliers' daughters back in Dominie Guthrie's schoolyard, caught handfuls of Mag Marshall's skirts, tugged and furled them until purchase permitted her one good solid yank which dragged the tink off her feet and planted her square on her buttocks on the ground.

Mirrin stepped in at once. She pinioned Mag's wrist and, snapping it backwards, broke the woman's grip on the brooch. Mirrin kicked the weapon away then swung round, expecting Colly to rush to her mother's aid. But the ugly girl was a coward. Shocked by the thoroughness of Mirrin's counter-attack and her mother's tumble, Colly only howled louder, her bellowing sobs waking the farm dogs to set up an uproar in the distance.

"So Tom is gone," said Mirrin. "He's left you before now, every November, in fact, if what he told me's true. But this year, you want t'blame *me* for it. You're *mad*, old woman, you're bloody *ravin' mad*. Tom's *never* goin' t'wed that horse-faced daughter o'yours, an' the sooner you realise it the better."

Mirrin punched the words at Mag Marshall, their noses almost touching, eyes glaring.

The tinker's voice was hoarse. "Clear out o'this camp, an' never come back t'it. You'll find no welcome in any gatherin' o'the travellin' folk from this day on, Stalker. No, nor yer fancy Tom Dandy neither. He's out, finished, wi' his own kind. When ye bed wi' him t'night, tell him that. Now, *get*!"

"I'm goin'."

Mirrin did not have to dive back into the hut to retrieve her dunnage. Some thoughtful tinker had already flung her bedroll and sack of clothing out on to the mud.

Fortunately she had slept dressed, except for bloomers and overskirt. She snatched up her bundles together with the coat that, in Blacklaw, had been her Sunday best black but which was shabby and soiled now. The tinkers moved aside as Mirrin collected her chattels. Donning the overskirt and coat, she stuffed the rest into the blanket and bound it with a length of rope. She hoisted the pack, looping the rope with a twist round her wrist. Later she would adjust the burden and fasten it tightly, high on her shoulders, the way Tom had taught her to do.

Tom! She could hardly blame him for sneaking off in the night. Perhaps he thought he was doing her a kindness by drifting casually out of her life. Perhaps! But she doubted it! Though she regretted his disappearance, she did not grieve over it. She had too much on her mind. She was possessed by a relief so vast that she realised at once how sick she had become of the tawdy tinkers' encampment and the furrows that the proud, mean folk ploughed round and round the seasonal fields. Why had she ever fallen for Tom's persuasive lies? He had only wanted a companion for the summer, that was all. Selfishly he had led her into the tinker camps, into the dank backwater of casual agricultural labour, simply as a buffer against loneliness and as a safeguard against Mag Marshall's insinuating demands.

Mirrin did not understand Tom's motives. She had no interest in them now. He had shucked her off, like a sack of millet off a cart, dropped her by the wayside, to go his own way to the sea or to some pick-and-scrape croft, perhaps. She questioned if she would ever see him again.

It took her ten to fifteen seconds to secure her load, then, without a moment's hesitation, she pivoted on her heel and headed off down the length of the field towards the footbridge and the clump of blackthorns which shielded the track to the turnpike.

Behind her the tinkers were silent, relieved, perhaps, to be shot of such a fierce *gorgio*. Mirrin flattered herself that there might be one or two of the men who would be sorry to see her go now that Tom had left her defenceless and vulnerable to wheedling inducements.

Barefoot she walked, skirts swinging, feet swishing in the wet grasses. She crossed the wooden foot-bridge and, for a second, turned her head and stared back at the encampment, at the huddle of figures surrounding Mag and her daughter, at the miserable huts slick with the fine mist which coated the flanks of the dales and gathered in the sump of the valley. Nobody waved, of course. She in turn gave no signal of ill-will or defiant farewell. The tinks had been part of her life for a season and yet had hardly affected her. Only Tom Armstrong had done that. At the bridge end, she turned south along the stony track out of sight of the camp, then paused and glanced round, half-expecting to see Tom seated on a tussock of grass, arms folded, pack by his feet, waiting for her, ready to mock her swift exit from Mag's clan.

But there was no sign of the man. As she put the miles behind her, Mirrin gave up looking for the tinker, and slipped into thinking about the past.

She supposed she could go home again, home to Blacklaw. It would not take her long if she was lucky; the broad highways which crossed the border carried much traffic. Two days, three days, a week at worst, and she could be right back home in grubby, gritty, friendly Lanarkshire.

But no, she would not choose that simple solution to her problems. Her quest had not bogged down yet. She had plenty of energy left, and, as the morning extended, plenty of curiosity about the towns, villages and big manufacturing cities of England. Blacklaw *wasn't* the hub of the world.

At a little after ten, Mirrin reached the first marked crossroad, eight miles out from the bowl of the mountains, into broader fields that spread along the coastal plain. She craned her neck to read the signpost's pointing arms. Metal brackets and wooden arrows were freshly painted by the coaching company, very bright and not yet weathered, matching her new mood. North? South? Manchester, Carlisle, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Leeds? Through the mediumship of the signs, she might make her choice.

Setting her pack on the grass at the base of the post she seated herself, back against the upright. She had not eaten yet that day. There was nothing edible in her pack, but the money belt around her waist pressed comfortably into her stomach. There was a little left of her harvest earnings, probably enough for a dozen hot meals and five or six nights dry lodgings.

So, she thought ruefully, I'm wealthier than I would be in Blacklaw, dropping all my coppers into the family jar to feed and fatten Drew. At least what I have is mine, to keep or spend as my mood and necessity dictate. Huh! Maybe the man only wanted to marry me for my money.

She hummed a snatch of 'My Lad's a Canny Lad' but then, because it increased her loneliness, ceased. She put her head back against the post and dozed. In sleep, however light, she forgot her hunger, though the memory of Tom Armstrong lingered in her mind — Tom Armstrong now, not Houston Lamont.

The fire in the boardroom grate smouldered sullenly that damp October morning. It flickered into life only an hour after the meeting began, close to the moment when tension and ill-feeling first flared into anger. Of the three men seated at the long deal table, Houston Lamont was the least involved. He was, however, no longer quite so indifferent to matters of business as he had been of late. Since Sydney Thrush had been appointed assistant manager and had ventured into policy-making areas, Houston's interest had reawakened.

The room lay left of the mansion's front door. It had been neglected for many years until Mirrin Stalker had reclaimed it and given it a modicum of comfort. Lamont was glad she had done so. Round the pithead offices were too many eavesdroppers anxious to spy on managerial meetings. The boardroom, it seemed, was coming back into its own again, thanks to Sydney Thrush's persuasive insistence on a regular weekly congress between management and owner.

The three men were separated by seven empty yew-backed chairs, symbols of alienation abetted by the ledgers and files which spread along the table top. In the large room, the men's voices rang hollowly, like those of actors on a rehearsal stage.

Leaning on his elbows, Lamont addressed Thrush, showing no trace of his dislike or distrust. "I take it that you have figures to substantiate your opinion?"

"Naturally, sir."

Sydney Thrush's lips slithered into a smile. It was the most humourless smile that Lamont had ever seen, vulpine — if one could imagine an almost hairless wolf — and self-confident, as neat and precise as an engineer's drawing, inked with a steel nib across Thrush's cartridge-paper complexion. Files were squared on the table before him, memoranda and agenda, models of neatness too, carefully annotated, each point struck off as it was raised, discussed and accepted.

Though there was little difference in their ages, Donald Wyld looked the elder, slightly tousled and harassed in contrast to Thrush's glasspaper smoothness.

"Let's hear them, then, *Mister* Thrush," Wyld glared across the table.

"Donald." The coalmaster's raised hand restrained Wyld. "The figures, please, Thrush."

Thrush lifted a sheaf of foolscap. "Recent export figures, incorporating all areas of industry, except shipping, are of interest. In 1837 the total gross value of Britain's exports was put at £255 million. In 1874, gross value dropped to £240 million. In '75 the drop continues: £233, and . . ."

"Is this relevant?" Wyld interrupted. "We aren't concerned with industry as a whole, only mining, *coal.* I can produce figures to show that we've hewn out thirty per cent more this year than we were doing eight years ago."

"The American figure is higher than thirty per cent: the German higher still," Thrush declared.

Clean-shaven, balding, the silky black flanges of hair that still adhered to the region of his ears clipped and brushed, his eyebrows thin crescents that might have been applied to naked flesh with a signwriter's brush dipped in Indian ink, lips of strangely dark coloration too: if Lamont had entertained any suspicions that Edith might find Sydney Thrush physically attractive, he discarded them. Not even Edith for all her perversity could be attracted to this smooth, black-and-white Delf-porcelain person, not sexually at any rate. Both Thrushs seemed genderless, Anna no less so than her brother. Even so, Edith held the couple in high esteem and, this past hour, Houston was beginning to appreciate his wife's sagacity.

"Coalmaster?" The fellow was reproving *him* for inattention.

"It's obvious that you have thoroughly researched the market, Thrush," Lamont said. "However, I am inclined to agree with Donald on the accommodating nature of figures. If this discussion is to be productive, might I suggest that we leave other branches of industry to fend for themselves and concentrate on the crisis in the pits."

"How does Mr. Wyld suggest we counter our crisis?" Thrush asked.

"Firstly, we must cut wages," Wyld said. "Colliers are no fools. They realise that *any* work is better than no work at all. Redundancies are inevitable. Apart from what we can save on the face shifts, we can certainly slice the pithead and clerical staff."

"Trifles, sir," Thrush said.

"You have a more . . . more concrete proposal, *sir*?" Wyld demanded. "I mean, theory's all very well, Thrush. But damn' me to hell, what *practical* proposals have you put forward since you came here."

"Coalmaster," said Thrush, "may I be given the chance to speak, please?"

"Donald," Lamont said, "let's hear what he has to say."

"Thank you, coalmaster."

The use of his title instead of his name was archaic; the implied subservience annoyed Lamont. He said nothing, however, nodding to Thrush to continue.

"In *addition* to Mr. Wyld's sensible, if minor, exigencies," Thrush said, "I have drafted a three-fold proposal. The intention behind my proposal may be summarised in a single word — expand."

"Expand?" Wyld burst out. "Jesus, the man's a ravin' lunatic, Mr. Lamont."

Lamont waved down Wyld's appeal. Thrush might be iconoclastic but he wasn't stupid.

Lamont said, "Your suggestions, Thrush?"

"First, we breach a whole new section in Pit Two." He extended forefinger and thumb. "Second, we explore the feasibility of employing mechanical cutters."

"The cost, Thrush!" Wyld exclaimed. "Consider the cost."

"Third, we curtail the use of checkweighmen at once."

Lamont studied his new employee carefully. Edith had not been mistaken. Though unscrupulous and cunning, Sydney Thrush was an owner's man right down the line. There were several in colliery circles but Lamont had never trusted them. He suspected he motives behind Thrush's profit-making drive. The man's ltimate loyalty would be to himself.

Practical and down-to-earth, Donald Wyld never wholly livorced himself from the cause of the miners. Like Lamont, Wyld had a streak of humanitarianism that, in times of grave rises, made the task of balancing profits against social hardship ery difficult indeed. Thrush was hindered by no such scruples.

"We'll *never* get those measures through!" said Wyld.

"I don't see why not, Wyld," said Thrush. "Who's to prevent s?"

"The men of Blacklaw," Wyld answered.

Lamont felt like a bone gnawed by two terriers. He was weary f wrangling. Probing, he said, "I agree with Wyld."

"Are you *afraid* of your work-force, sir?" Thrush asked.

"I am . . . respectful of them," said Lamont.

"No doubt they will whine and complain and threaten strike ction," said Thrush. "But if they are reminded of the unemploy-nent and short wages prevailing in other pits not ten miles from ere, they'll see sense rapidly enough."

"An' find a new way of breathin' too, maybe?" put in Wyld. 'For your information, *Mister* Thrush, there's a foul air in the icinity of Number Two Pit: if you took a wee trip down in the age sometime instead of . . ."

"I am aware of the ventilation problem," Thrush interrupted.

"Then how in God's name can we breach new tunnels?"

"With mechanical cutters."

Lamont said, "In many English pits the cutters failed."

Thrush said, "In England, yes, but the seams of most Scottish its — Blacklaw included — are thin and steep. Ideal for the use f machinery. It's more economic than man power."

"I assume these machines don't operate themselves?" said Wyld.

Thrush raised crescent ink-black brows, as if he had failed to emark the heavy sarcasm in Wyld's tone. "They are operated by pecially trained men, of course."

"Specially trained to exist on carbon monoxide gas?"

Thrush sighed. "Ventilation need not be a *bête noire*, Wyld. orkshire and Lancashire have successfully used steam-driven ans for several years now."

"The cost of installation is astronomical," said Wyld.

"You're carping," said Thrush. "The initial outlay of capital is certainly high. According to my figures, however, we would recoup the expenditure out of profits in a single year, allowing for a down market."

Wyld grunted. He did not trust Thrush's figures but was not prepared, at that point, to argue against them. The sheet of foolscap that the assistant manager slid down the table was impressively itemised.

Wyld changed tack. "You'll never get away with terminating the use of checkweighmen. I don't give a damn what's happening in Wales and Yorkshire. In Blacklaw, the checkweighmen must stay."

"Must?" said Thrush.

"*Must* — unless you've invented a machine for coping with a bloody riot," said Wyld.

Thrush grinned, as if to indicate that just such a machine did exist.

The position of checkweighmen was peculiar to the mining industry. Colliers were paid according to their output, wages computed at the pithead by means of tallies attached by each miner to every basket filled. If left exclusively to employers' representatives to weigh and account the daily totals and subsequent wage, the possibilities of unfair treatment were legion. For many years now it had been part of the process for a representative of the colliers to make on-the-spot checks on the employers' calculations. The system, though, remained open to abuses, in spite of amendments and clauses in the Mines Regulation Act. The problem was that checkweighmen were also employees of the owner; they could be dismissed on the slightest excuse by an unscrupulous owner.

Lamont said, "I take it you've absorbed the changes in the Mines Regulation Act, Thrush?"

"I have, coalmaster. The clauses are no more than recommendations. You know how long reinstatement can take once a checkweighman's been dismissed: eighteen months, two years — even when they have the courts' support."

Wyld made a sound of disgust. "It's bloody dishonest. I won't condone falsifying a man's tally."

The manager looked challengingly at the coalmaster. Lamont made no immediate reply. He was thinking of Mirrin. She would have been vociferously against this manoeuvre. Perhaps she would even have persuaded him to dismiss Thrush for suggesting it. Mirrin could be very persuasive: her conscience had touched the roots of his own honesty. But Mirrin was no longer part of his household, of his life.

Cautiously, Lamont said, "Do you have figures to indicate where the money will come from to effect these innovations, Thrush?"

"Yes, coalmaster, I do have a paper."

In three weeks, Thrush had done more accounting work than the whole staff of the pit had turned in during the past year.

"I have also discussed it with Mrs. Lamont," Thrush said.

"Have you indeed?" Lamont murmured.

"There are two sources of acquiring the capital needed for a programme of expansion — bank loans and private monies."

"Private monies?" said Lamont.

"From small investors," said Thrush. "My sister and I, for example, would be only too pleased to make our small savings available. Also, Mrs. Lamont assures me that she could drum . . . I mean, encourage certain ladies and gentlemen with a little spare cash to invest it in mining."

It was exactly the kind of gesture that would appeal to Edith's new mood of competence. She had always been too energetic simply to swan about the drawing rooms of the rich and semi-rich indulging in casual chit-chat. Thinking of it now, hazily, Lamont realised that his wife had made excellent contacts in Glasgow's commercial houses. The cleverness of turning her demerit as a leader of society — that is, the source of her capital — into an advantage gave Lamont a fresh respect for his wife's ingenuity. If she could not push Blacklaw into the background, then she would frankly bring it to the fore, utilise it as a means of enhancing her reputation in Glasgow society. Edith would not admit the possibility of failure, of dragging her 'friends' into loss and bankruptcy.

For an instant Lamont envisaged the scheme as the flowering of a New Jerusalem, a venture bold enough to make him, and his investors, very rich indeed.

But what would it matter in the long run? He had no children, no blood kin to inherit his fortune.

"I see." Enthusiasm waned again into a cold appraisal of Thrush's projections. If the period of deflation continued, Blacklaw colliery, almost alone among the Lanarkshire pits, might ride out the storm. "I would be grateful if you would prepare your documents for my further scrutiny, Thrush."

"But, Mr. Lamont . . ." Wyld began.

The manager's protestations were interrupted by a knock upon the boardroom door.

"Come," Lamont shouted.

One of the daily maids, quivering with nervousness, stood in the doorway.

"Well, girl?" said Lamont.

"B . . . b . . . beggin' your pardon, sir, but there's a doctor here, from Glasgow."

Lamont rose to his feet at once. "I must leave you, gentlemen."

"But nothing's been decided," Wyld said.

"I suggest, Donald, that you apply yourself to studying Mr. Thrush's proposals in detail."

"Mr. Lamont, you're surely not considerin' . . . ?"

"At this precise moment," Lamont said, "I must attend my sister. I'll return shortly."

Donald Wyld had enough sense to put up no further argument. He had every sympathy for the coalmaster's sister. In that department there was no place for an adviser, other than medical specialists.

Thrush rose too and, with an oddly formal bow, said, "I trust that Miss Lamont will benefit from the doctor's ministrations."

The gesture was nicely timed.

Lamont paused at the door. "Thank you, Thrush," he said and favoured Edith's protégé with a faint smile, acknowledging for the first time Sydney Thrush's place in Blacklaw's scheme of things.

Dorothy Lamont's room was on the first floor, in the opposite wing of the house to those rooms full of memories both sad and sweet — the nursery in which his son Gordon had lived and died, the bedroom in which he and Mirrin had made love, the master bedroom, more appropriately the bedroom of the mistress of the house, a frilly, perfumed boudoir in which her husband's clothes and small personal possessions were kept discreetly out of sight in a large closet. Dorothy's room was simply furnished; flower prints on the walls, china ornaments on the overmantel and little occasional tables. The sofa was positioned in such a way that it gave a view of the trees bordering the drive and, unfortunately, of the tops of the colliery winding towers, an uninspiring prospect on this drab winter's day when the sad rags of the oak leaves hung limply from the branches. The grid which squared the window was not discreet, though side curtains hid the massive bolts which secured it to the outside frame. It was with regret — remembering the room in the institution from which he had brought his sister — that Lamont had agreed to Edith's demand that the woman's suite be made secure.

Anna Thrush had relieved Doctor Minto of his hat and overcoat, an act of courtesy that should have been performed by the downstairs maid — another example of the slip-shod service that his wife got from her servants. He shook Minto's hand: a dry palm, strong fingers, square and clean, like the rest of the man.

"You may leave us, Miss Thrush." Lamont gestured peremptorily to the housekeeper.

"Sir," Anna Thrush said, "I've attended to the fire and secured the guard."

"Thank you," said Lamont, without so much as glancing at the [redacted]

A moment later the door closed.

Minto had already made his way to the canopied bed, a piece of furniture that stood midway along the gable wall and which, in design and ornamentation, reminded Lamont of a cross between a nursery cradle and a high-kirk altar.

"Ah, Miss Lamont," Minto was saying. "How delightful your room is. I see you share my fondness for floral prints. I've quite a collection myself, though not so fine as those which decorate your walls here."

Time-honoured medical small talk; Minto was erecting a screen of affability from behind which he could study his patient. The Glasgow doctor did it well, Lamont noted, though the pleasantries elicited no response from Dorothy. Months ago the woman had retreated so far from reality that only intimate knowledge of her history could equip one to follow the intricacies of her thoughts, a tapsalteerie puzzle of childhood allusions and memories, jumbled like the glitter in a kaleidoscope. To a lesser extent it had always been so but, until recently, there had invariably been some connection with reality, some means of entrance, of contact. Mirrin had managed to bring his sister out of herself a little, to make her laugh, to keep her amused. That period of responsiveness had gone now. Dorothy responded to nobody except himself, blanking out Anna Thrush, Edith, the servants, even the affable and expert Doctor Minto, as if they did not exist.

Staring out of round, dead eyes, out of a gaunt plastercast mask of a face, propped on her long and wrinkled neck, Dorothy Lamont addressed her brother.

"You did not come?"

"I did, my love, but you were sleeping."

"I was sleeping?"

"Yes."

Transformed by pity, dread and love, Lamont sank to his knees by the side of the bed and took her withered stick-like fingers into his hand. It was like touching some ancient thing, a crone in her eighties: Dorothy was younger than he was by a couple of years. She was fading before his eyes, a fraction more each day, a gramme less of her. Even her hair was thinning; 'moulting' Edith called the process of degeneration.

"Pretending," Dorothy said.

Minto watched, alert, not smiling now. He would observe her responses in relation to her brother.

"Mirrin pretends," Dorothy said. "I pretend."

Lamont nodded. He could not trust himself to speak.

No words lay in Dorothy's mouth. The connection seemed suddenly to have been broken between her and the world. Her expression was totally vacant, her body perfectly motionless.

Quietly Minto said, "Is she commonly like this?"

"More common of late," murmured Lamont. "Is it a dangerous condition?"

"Wait," Minto said. So far he had not touched the woman, examined her, yet Lamont trusted the observation. He was paying Minto for vast experience in treating the demented and disturbed.

Dorothy's vacancy was subtly replaced by agitation. The process took almost three minutes to accomplish. Using Houston's shoulder, she pulled herself up on the pillows and, gripping her brother's neck, broke into a high, chattering gabble that fluctuated between terror and wistful longing.

"Don't. Oh, don't. Should not go. Go there. No. Too small: too little small. My flowers. Mirrin. Mirrin."

Sweat beaded Lamont's forehead. He strove vainly to remain detached.

The child's voice in the woman's mouth flayed him. He understood.

"I see smoke. I see green. I see water. I see mouses. Mirrin. I see. See. There, water. No, oh, no. Yes: all gone Houston?"

"Yes, my love?"

"Houston? Houston?"

"Yes, Dorothy. I'm here."

She was gone from him, too, the tenuous strand snapped by the load of fearful memories that crushed her and would, perhaps soon, destroy her. She shook her head wildly, thrashing her body from the waist. Still Minto made no move to calm her. Confused, Lamont did not intervene to prevent the frantic and outlandish motions. He held her wrist, forcing her hand to remain against his neck and cheek, as if that contact must stand for more rational communication. Then, in a split second, Dorothy's contortions ceased. She became rigidly immobile, head slightly cocked, expression girlish and wistfully tender.

In a fragile soprano, plaintively, waveringly, she sang, "*Song bird in the sky, sing for me. Flowers that bloom nearbye, bloom for . . .*"

Mirrin had taught her the song. Patiently Mirrin had sung the words to and with his sister, coaxing her into learning something new, a diversion that did not lie in the rotting marshland of the distant past. How much could have been accomplished if Mirrin had remained?

Repetitively, Dorothy sang: "*Song bird in the sky, sing for me. Flowers that bloom nearbye, bloom for me. Song bird . . .*"

Lamont felt Minto's sympathetic grasp drawing him away from the bed. He rose. Dorothy's fingers slid from his cheek, slid down his shoulder, slid, lax, to the quilt.

The coalmaster crossed to the window and peered into the colourless landscape. Everything he could see from this window belonged to him. Even the smoke that tainted the sky was his smoke. He did not weep. He was long past weeping. He would never weep again.

"There's nothing we can do to break down the walls, is there?" He had put that question to Mirrin on the hilltop, that last day. He had known how she would reply. "Not together, Houston: only apart." And she had left him. And he had lost her. And now, he was losing Dorothy.

"Mr. Lamont?"

He turned to the doctor by his side.

Dorothy was silent now, like some huge mechanical doll tucked into the bed, a clockwork puppet with spring wound down, which nobody had the gumption to re-wind. Broken.

Minto indicated the door. The men moved stealthily towards it out into the corridor at whose end Anna Thrush and Edith loitered, spectral against the gelid reflection of the big window. Deliberately Lamont steered Minto away from the women, down the cul-de-sac of the west wing to the second window. For a moment the men looked down on the lawn. A squirrel, big and bushy, was scurrying across the faded grass, pausing now and again to wash his face and scout around for food, and enemies. Not until the vital little animal had vanished into the trees did Minto speak.

"I can offer little hope of a recovery, Mr. Lamont."

"A . . . recovery?"

"Miss Lamont is akin to a spent candle. Mentally and physically, it is only a matter of time until she flickers out."

"I . . . I appreciate your honesty, doctor," Houston said. "How long?"

"Who can say? She has good nursing here, I expect."

"Yes."

"This person she talks of — Mirrin? Is she from the past?" Minto asked.

"Yes."

"I got the impression that she had nursed your sister, in childhood, perhaps?"

"No, last winter."

"Ah!" Minto had probably heard details of the tragedy from Doctor McKay. He did not press the subject.

Lamont said, "If . . . if Dorothy were removed from here . . . into your care in a hospital ward, say, would that . . . ?"

Minto shook his head. "There's nothing that medicine can do. She's better here."

"Ah, God!"

"If you wish to consult another specialist . . ."

"No," Lamont said. "I accept your diagnosis, Doctor Minto."

"Doctor McKay will continue in attendance to administer sedative draughts when necessary, though I do not recommend over-usage of the opiates."

The doctor's tone was professional again.

Lamont accompanied Minto down into the hall below. Edith and Anna Thrush were gone. The housekeeper would be with Dorothy now, like as not, seated on the bedside chair like some smooth-feathered raven.

The doctor's overcoat and hat had been negligently left on a chair by the front door. Lamont helped the Glaswegian into the coat then shook his hand.

"I am grateful for your honesty, Doctor Minto."

"I will call again, if I may, in a month."

"Doctor Minto, is my sister dangerous?"

"Dangerous? Lord, Mr. Lamont, does she look dangerous? No, no, your sister is not dangerous. In fact, she is even past the stage of being a danger to herself."

"Thank you, Doctor Minto."

"Good afternoon to you, Mr. Lamont."

Lamont closed the front door and wandered aimlessly into the centre of the hall. From the boardroom came raised voices, Wyld's didactic baritone, Thrush's mild laconic falsetto, womanish but not shrill. His managers were at each other's throats.

They needed his strength: the colliery, the whole of Blacklaw needed his strength, his power of decision.

In mental turmoil he condemned the folk of Blacklaw as guilty parties in reducing Dorothy to this pass. She had always been childlike and fey. Not until her traumatic involvement with the death of the Sinclair child, however, had wasting sickness bloomed in her brain like a weed. Edith's arrant selfishness and the behaviour of certain village hotheads had cost Dorothy Mirrin Stalker's companionship, and swiftly, lethally, her sanity. His teeth clenched. *They* had done it: out of ignorance and malice and spite. Their black begrimed fingers had poked out her innocence and destroyed the last potential vestiges of happiness. Poor bemused Dorothy!

Seized by an anger that swamped his grief at Minto's verdict, Lamont strode to the boardroom and flung open the door.

Wyld and Thrush were both on their feet, snarling like dogs through a fence.

"Hold your tongues, both of you," the coalmaster shouted. He walked down the length of the table, kicked out the tall-backed chair, placed his foot on the seat and braced his hand on his knee, scowling at the managers who, sheepishly, returned to their places.

"I've made my decision," Lamont told them. "Thrush, I cannot accept your hypothesis that an improvement in the fortunes of the coal trade is imminent. Wyld, you have always been a working-man's manager. While I have supported your equable policies so far, I see ruin in what you have had to say today, in the degree and direction of your advice to me."

"Mr. Lamont . . ." Wyld blustered.

Lamont stared him into silence. "My decision is that opening a new section and investing in mechanical cutters and ventilation equipment would be improvident at this particular time. Expansion must wait."

Wyld looked astonished, then nodded smugly, smirking at Thrush.

Lamont went on, "Considerable savings must be made at all levels of the working: management, administration, cutting, sorting, transport, the whole range. We will discontinue the use of checkweighmen in Blacklaw pit as from the first of next month."

Thrush remained impassive.

"Tallies will be made, as usual, by representatives of the manager's office. Thrush, you will be responsible for that."

"Yes, coalmaster."

"I also intend to cut the basic wage rate."

"By how much?" demanded Wyld, livid with anger.

"I will determine the new rate when I have gone over the figures in detail," Lamont replied. "I will also reduce the work force."

"*Pay-off!*" Wyld cried. "Cut wages *and* pay-off?"

"I am not a charitable institution," Lamont said. "I am a coal-master. I must have my profit."

Wyld was on his feet. "Never, sir, never have I heard you say that before. What's taken hold of you, Mr. Lamont? Is it this . . . this . . . work-glutton that's persuaded you?"

"Profit," Lamont repeated. "I've had enough of loss."

"Very well, sir," said Wyld grimly, gathering his papers. "If that's the way you intend to run Blacklaw, you may do so without my help. I'll be no part of a slave-pit."

"That," Lamont said, "is your choice, Donald."

"If I might advise," Thrush said, as Wyld hurried past him, "I would think it over very carefully, Mr. Wyld. Work is hard to come by, even for managers."

Donald Wyld did not deign to reply. He slammed the boardroom door behind him. For a moment, Lamont felt a pang of regret at his harshness. They had been together and worked well in tandem for several years, Donald and he. Hardening himself, he shrugged, kicked the chair out further and seated himself.

Beckoning with his forefinger, he summoned the new assistant to him. "Bring your wages and rating tallies, Thrush."

"Certainly, coalmaster. And the redundancy programme I took the liberty of drafting — for your approval, of course?"

Lamont hesitated, appalled at the cunning and gall of the man who would soon be manager of Blacklaw: then he snorted. "Aye, Thrush," he said. "If you've sharpened the damned axe for me, I may as well use it."

"Very wise, coalmaster," Sydney Thrush said. "Very wise indeed."

Packed with furniture, the vehicle was cumbersome. Tables, chairs and wicker baskets within which crockery rattled and chattered swayed as the wagon, drawn by one sturdy horse, ground towards the crossroads. The name *Matthew Brummidge* was stencilled in gilt on the side of the cart and under it, *Carter and Hauler* in plain red paint. Hopefully Mirrin rose and, lifting her bundle, hugged it to her arms as the cart halted at the signpost. She stepped forward and smiled at the thin-faced man on the driving-box. He was well into his sixties, with pale eyes and a thin pink nose. Silvery hair feathered his hat brim. A huge woollen scarf was wound round his neck and draped fore and aft of his body like an anchor chain.

"Good morning to you, sir," Mirrin called. "Damp t'day, is it not?"

"Seasonable: seasonable." The carrier glanced up and down the empty highway. "Are you walkin'?"

Mirrin grinned. "Just gatherin' my strength for another few miles, sir."

A movement among the furniture at the rear caught her attention. An awning had been rigged across the breadth of the cart. From the canvas flap a woman appeared. She picked her way through the obstacles to take a seat beside the man.

The carter said, "This is my wife — Mrs. Brummidge. An' who might you be, girl?"

"Mirrin Stalker's my name."

"Where are you bound for?"

"I'm in search of work."

The old man and old woman pursed their lips and, in unison, shook their heads.

"Precious little of that in any part o'the country," the man said, dolorously.

Mrs. Brummidge craned forward to squint at Mirrin. Perched on the seat, the pair seemed more like sister and brother than a married couple. Calmly Mirrin returned the wife's scrutiny.

"You look decent enough, child," the woman decided. "Church going?"

"All my life," Mirrin answered. "Never miss a Sunday."

Two pairs of eyes met, heads nodded. The husband jerked his thumb towards the awning at the rear of the piled cart. "We're lading furnishings south for a gentleman. Heading Leeds way, lass. Unless you've a hankerin' to wait for a ride into Scotland you're welcome to come with us. I'm thinking that if it's work you're after, you'll fare better in the Midlands than the north."

"Find your own food an' pay a share of the horse's fodder, though, since we're not wealthy enough t'dispense charity," the woman added. "The Almighty provides just sufficient for our needs."

"With my help here an' there," put in Mr. Brummidge.

Hesitating, Mirrin bit her lip.

South? North?

God knows, the situation in Scotland had not been easy for a casual hand back in the spring. If Mr. Brummidge was correct, then it must be near impossible by now. Work, just follow the work, like Tom Dandy said.

Mirrin said, "I've money. An' a notion to try the Midlands. Thank you kindly, I'll travel with you."

The carter informed her that she would find a chair under the canvas and could make herself comfortable on it provided she was careful not to soil or tear the upholstery. Mrs. Brummidge said that they would stop soon for a bite of dinner.

Mirrin climbed into the cart, found the armchair and carefully settled herself.

"Are y' set then, lass?" Brummidge called.

"I am."

"Off we go."

The cart lurched forward, at no great pace. The crossroads signpost dropped gradually out of sight.

Mirrin watched the landscape drift patiently past, showing no discernible change from mile to mile, yet never quite the same.

South? Why not? Nobody was waiting for her in Scotland. South was as good as north any day of the week, she supposed. She would be sure to find work in the Midlands where mills and factories were always crying out for hands. Wages, so she'd heard, were good. Perhaps she'd earn enough to buy a few clothes. She could badly do with smartening herself up.

Ahead of her, a reedy female voice broke into song:

"Speed Thy servants, Saviour, speed them;
Thou art Lord of winds and waves:
They were bound, but Thou has freed them . . ."

Mirrin smiled to herself and burrowed deeper into the chair.

She hoped that Mrs. Brummidge's choice of hymn might prove an appropriate omen for the days that lay ahead.

Seven

Angus Salmon, LL.B., member of the Faculty of Advocates and Curators and lecturer in Roman Law, was known to all and sundry, including most of the Scottish bench, as 'Fish'. By a life-long process of transmogrification, Fish had assumed an astonishing likeness to that creature of the river and sea. Fish was prone to rise to bait and, with a stupidity that would have shamed any cock salmon, never seemed to realise when he had been hooked, gaffed and landed. Fish, therefore, provided the perfect subject for Drew Stalker's exhibitions of mordant wit. During the course of Salmon's lectures interminable duologues somehow developed between tutor and student and poor Fish was lured into intricate discussions on matters totally immaterial to Roman Law. Given line, inched in, spooled a wee, slacked and fetched round by the nose, the tutor could gradually be angled into flatly contradicting his initial hypothesis and taking a stand against himself. No other student dared intervene. Fish was Stalker's prize. The beauty of the jest was that Fish considered Stalker no end of a fine fellow, the only serious-minded seeker after knowledge in a roomful of sniggering vulgarians.

One afternoon in early November, Drew proved himself beyond doubt the most adroit haranguer in the freshman year. For an hour he skilfully steered Salmon towards defending Thomas Carlyle's philosophy of Titanism, though the lecturer, an avowed Christian and supporter of democratic liberalism, was known to detest Carlyle. At the end of the performance, as Fish paused in bewilderment at his own utterances, the class rose and applauded, leaving Fish puzzled but gratified by the suspicion that he had at last touched a collective nerve through the brilliance of his repartee.

Andrew Stalker knew better, of course.

As Drew gathered his books at the lecture's end, he was aware of the scrutiny of his fellow students, especially of the 'inner circle', the McAlmond set. Outwardly Drew remained nonchalant, but he sensed that on that afternoon he had shed anonimity for ever.

In the crowded corridor between the lecture halls and the main portico, Fraser McAlmond caught up with him.

"Well played, young Stalker," he said, in a cultured drawl. "I say, you really had our old Fish on toast — on toast, hm?"

Drew laughed, as he was expected to do.

Mellish and the Sprotts had caught up with them.

"Worth a case of claret to see the Fish hooked and gaffed so expertly," Mellish declared. "Like the cut of your jib, young Stalker."

"Case of claret, did you say, Hector?" McAlmond enquired. "A fair price; your contribution, what?"

"Stick us for the meat, Fraser," Innes Sprott said.

"Much your province," McAlmond said. "Meat, I mean."

Drew laughed again. He was confident enough now to acknowledge the Sprotts' carnal foibles.

Fraser McAlmond said, "And young Stalker will provide the *bon mots*, will he not?"

"Who better," Mellish said.

"Tonight at eight, Stalker, if convenient," McAlmond said. "Discreet quintet, good food, good wine, good talk. We'd be pleased if you'd join us; in the *Barn*."

"Know it?" Balfour Sprott asked.

"Union Place," Drew said.

"The very same," Mellish said. "Our guest, of course."

"Kind of you, gentlemen," Drew said. "I'd be delighted."

"Good chap."

Good chap in a suit that would not have past muster on one of the McAlmond bailiffs: Fraser's cigar-cutter, Innes Sprott's tie-pin or Balfour's silver-knobbled malacca cane, pawned in the Vennel, would have supplied him with ten suits better than the one he possessed.

As he walked into the brittle November sunshine, Drew experienced a moment's dismay at the steepness of the pyramid he had chosen to climb; then, rationalising, rejected for ever that particular qualm. He was riding to town on his intellect not his elegance. The McAlmond crew knew it. It would please them to adopt him, not as a lapdog but as an unpredictable mongrel. They might patronise him, but they would always be wary of his power. He savoured that thought as he hurried back to Shannon's Close to unpack the almost-new shirt with the Shakespeare collar and the octagon necktie that he had preserved for just such an occasion.

Tonight, the Campbell girl would tap on his door in vain.

It had been a grand night, a night to remember, dish following dish, game birds succeeded by rare crown of beef, blancmanges by strawberry-flavoured ices, and, of course, one vintage poured on top of another until, by the end of the dinner, none of the participants had been in a fit state to pass opinion on anything. Drew had eaten hugely and drunk meagrely. He had no intention of losing control of himself in that company. It had been his lot, at an hour close to two o'clock, to troll Abbotsford Park and Bruce Place in search of a hackney and, when the conveyance was found, to load Fraser, Hector, Innes and Balfour into it like so many sides of pork, and, yelling farewells, pack them off to their Morningside apartments: a woolly enough introduction to spendthrift circles where money was scattered about like gravel off a shovel.

In the period before the wine took hold Drew had made a striking impression on his new companions. He could drop hints with the best of them, he discovered, and had a delicate touch with innuendo, forging a bond with the Sprotts by his dissertation on the sexual peccadillos of the working class. Early in the evening he had also planted an invention about his parentage. To his surprise, he had gained sympathy from Mellish who, as it happened, had inherited stock in a Fifeshire colliery, though he had never so much as cast eyes on the place.

As the hackney clopped away, the strains of a ribald ditty trailing in its wake, Drew gave way to a small celebration of his own, an impromptu jig upon the pavement, stirred by wine and the gleeful realisation that his background and lack of cash would not be obstacles after all. Nothing could hold him back. He could read the chaps of the McAlmond set like cheap novels, play them like penny whistles and crank patronage from them like washing from a mangle. Using them as models he would soon refine his speaking voice and manners, thus substantiating his claim to be the son of a member of the middle class — or damned near it — stumbled on hard times.

Shannon's Close was dark when he reached it. The stench seemed more foetid tonight. A stirring in the shadows made him stiffen. He paused, waiting: a savage dog in the area, a marauding stray, had already attacked a woman and two children. Drew did not care for dogs at the best of times. Broken heads and stolen wallets were also ten-a-penny in the environs of High Street.

When the movement occurred once more, realisation dawned upon Drew. A slight figure materialised in the scant light of the gas-mantel at the close mouth.

"Did you not have the damned sense to go home?" Drew hissed, glancing up apprehensively at the door of the lodge where the Sankey woman lived. "How long've you been here?"

"An . . . an hour. More. I don't rightly know, Drew."

She was shivering. Her cheeks were streaked with tears. She made to move against him the way a feral cat might do when it seeks to coax a tidbit from a stranger.

"I had t'talk t'you, Drew."

"It could've waited until tomorrow."

"Can we go inside?"

"It's late, too late, Heather. Besides, I'm tired."

Drew stepped to the railing and put his hand upon it, waving at her with the other. "Off home with you. Your friends'll let you in."

The girl's voice was shrill and loud. "No, please, Drew."

Drew glanced again at the windows overhead. Faint light in one of them. With ill-concealed anger, he stepped into the courtyard again and, hauling Heather by the elbow, pulled her across the cobbles to the area at the back of the midden.

"I don't want you t'come here any . . ." he began.

She was sobbing even before he spoke.

"I'm with child."

"What child?" Drew demanded. "What the devil are you talkin' about?"

"With child: my child: I'm havin' a baby."

"What? Now?"

"No, but . . . Please, Drew, listen."

Drew felt nothing. The claret glow waned and his irritation with it. He peered at the girl cowering back against the brickwork as if she was no more than a chalk drawing, a sketch. After a split-second's hesitation, he said, drily, "An' whose child is it, Heather?"

"Yours, Drew."

"First, may I establish that you are, in fact, pregnant."

"I am: I am."

"Who told you?"

"Betty Keegan."

"How does she know?"

"She's had two babies herself."

"An' this woman, this Keegan, has she examined you?"

"Aye."

"How far into your pregnancy are you?"

"Six weeks."

"I've barely known you that length of time."

"It's yours, Drew. It *must* be yours."

"Second, then, let's consider your claim that I'm the father."

"You are: you are."

"Quiet, Heather: d'you want to wake the whole neighbourhood?" Drew told her. "You say you've not been with any man except me?"

"You *know* I haven't. Drew what's . . . why d'you question me? It's the truth I'm tellin' you."

"Very well, Heather." He hesitated again then, awkwardly, shifted towards her, put his arm about her shoulders and escorted her sedately across the well-like court towards the closemouth. "Very well, my . . . my love. We'll discuss it tomorrow. I'll tell you what t'do tomorrow."

"You won't . . . Drew, you won't . . ."

"Won't what?"

"Make me get rid of it."

"Not unless that's your wish."

"I couldn't. I mean, I couldn't stand it."

"No, well, we'll see," Drew said.

On the spire of St. Giles and on the tattered awnings of the ragman's warehouse, frost sparkled in gibbous moonlight. The cobbles were sugared with it, too. Tomorrow the horses would skid and stumble on their pull up from the Grass Market.

He kissed her on the mouth, let her cling to him, not sobbing now, for several agonising minutes. He did not know how long he could remain manly and steadfast. He did not dare push her away. Murmuring, he said, "You must go now, Heather. Go home. I'll . . . I'll think of something."

"Tomorrow, Drew?"

"Aye."

"Here? You will be here tomorrow night?"

"Aye."

"I'm sorry: I'm sorry, Drew. I'm . . ."

"Goodnight, dearest."

"Oh, God, I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Goodnight, Heather, my love."

A knife, a pillow, the hank of rope with which he tied up his travelling case, the leather strap that bound his library borrowings: any one of them might become a tool in effecting release from the bondage of the orphan bitch whose hysterical claims would wreck all that he had slaved and sacrificed for. The Sprotts would chortle when news of his foolishness leaked out. To be saddled with a skinny serving wench from the *Cockerel* tavern, to father a bastard on her: the sordidness of it, the waste, was sickening. Lamont's sponsorship would be withdrawn. Havershaw would see to that. It was probable that Mam would not accept him back in the household. He was only seventeen years old. It had not occurred to him that, in years if not in intellect, he was still a youth. Untrained youths were a drug on the labour market. What could he do?

He could kill her.

As he performed ritualistic chores about the attic, lighting the fire, boiling water in a pan, brewing coffee from a packet of grounds, undressing, donning his robe, Drew veered between panic and a cruelty shared with the worst of a long line of Scottish murderers. Homicidal fantasies kept him from disintegrating, from flying back home to hide his face in Mam's apron and sob out his tale of woe.

Mam would make him marry the girl. He would be found work, if he was lucky, in one of the pits, probably as a clerk. He would spend his days under a pall of coaldust and his nights imprisoned with an illiterate highland sow and her importunate farrow in a small tied cottage. The golden aura of McAlmond's world faded.

De Quincey had considered murder as one of the fine arts. Aye, murder could be that all right, and more. It could be a necessity, justifiable as an act of self-defence.

Sipping coffee to clear his head and sucking slowly on a black cheroot, Drew travelled down from the ultimate means of redressing the tenor of his life through more realistic methods to bottom in despair. In that trough he wallowed in the callow terrors of boyish guilt and the anguish of realising that he had been naïve. He leapt to the top again. Murder was a better philosopher's stone than responsibility.

Heather Campbell would not be missed. Her ignorant cronies would assume that her man had taken her away. If by chance she'd let his name slip to any of the tavern whores, they would hardly be likely to remember it. *Corpus delictae*: without that, no prosecution, not even discovery. Where? The Pentlands. How would he get her there? A day in the country. He would need to carry a spade. Difficult. How else? Drowning? Much more promising. A fall from a high place? A distinct possibility. If he mocked up a suicide, the authorities would surely not probe too deeply into circumstances. On the other hand, the sow was pregnant. Reason enough to prompt a self-inflicted death fall. But it might — and here luck entered the picture — *might* lead to an investigation. He could not be sure. Successful murderers did not have casebooks written on their crimes. In trial reports he had perused, Drew recognised the vagaries of pure, blind chance. He did not intend to stake his future, his very neck on such a gaming table.

Suddenly Drew knew what he must do.

If his judgment of Heather Campbell's character was any way accurate, then his plan would not fail. Indeed, it would hasten his upward progress.

He had less than twenty-four hours to act.

Gow Havershaw returned from taking his dinner at the *Curling Stone* tavern, sober haunt of lawyers, merchants and brokers and as unlike the dens of the lower reaches of the Mile as could be imagined. He had eaten spare ribs and a baked potato and drunk a single glass of port with his cheese. He had smoked a pipe of Birdseye Shag and conversed with a fellow solicitor on the state of the nation for a peaceful half hour in the coffee room, toasting his shanks at one of the room's two fires. Thus rested and refreshed he returned, puffing a little on the hill and taking the stairs by cautious degrees, to his chambers to apply himself to preparing a brief in the case of Regina vs. The City of Edinburgh Brickworks, an involved claim by the Crown Lands Commission over infringement of building supplies and materials by the borough-owned company.

The door of the inner sanctum was, of course, locked. But Havershaw's clerk, a wizened male virago by the name of Daniel Horn, supposedly took his midday meal on the premises and was instructed not to turn business away. The business that Horn had not turned away that dinner hour took the form of young Drew Stalker who, as Havershaw entered, rose from the clients' bench, closed the volume of murder trial proceedings in which he had been immersed, and boldly requested an interview.

"What is it now, Stalker?" said Havershaw, unlocking the door of his office and walking on in. "Come in, come in."

Havershaw hung his Ulster on the peg behind the door and, brushing a few crumbs from his waistcoat, drew an appropriate file on Crown Lands from his shelf and set it importantly on his desk, indicating that he was unwilling to grant Stalker more than a couple of minutes of his precious time.

"I'll come to the point, sir," Stalker said. "I wish to change my lodgings."

Havershaw stroked his lip and seated himself in the wooden throne. "Have you been, ah, asked to quit?"

"No."

"Reason?"

"A personal friend wishes me to take up lodgings in his apartments."

"Personal friend, Stalker? What, ah, will this companionable exchange cost you in terms of increased rental: or, aha, does your personal friend happen to reside in one of our, ah, less salubrious areas?"

"My friend lodges in Planetree Gardens, Morningside."

"Lord, Stalker, you are ascending, aren't you: hm?"

"An apartment there isn't yet available but will be at the end of the Christmas term. In the interim I intend to lodge in Marlborough Street, which is close enough."

"Are, ah, you asking for money?"

"No, sir," said Stalker. "I am informing you of my intention to change my lodgings."

"You still haven't given a satisfactory reason."

"My friend wishes me to tutor him in certain subjects on the curriculum."

"You?"

"Yes, Mr. Havershaw."

"Tutor?"

"Yes."

"Well, aha! Hmm! If that's what your, ah, friend wishes, I suppose it's up to him. Will he pay?"

"I will receive the bounty of his table, thus saving considerable expenditure."

Havershaw frowned and, leaning forward in his chair, enquired, "Who is this generous, ah, friend, Stalker?"

"His name is Fraser McAlmond."

Havershaw sat back. "McAlmond?"

"From you, sir, I wish to acquire a letter to Mrs. Sankey, manager of my present lodging, requesting the return of the major portion of the advance quarter's rent, less two weeks, which Mr. Horn paid over in cash today week, past."

"Return of the unused rent to, ah, whom?"

"To myself, Mr. Havershaw. I will transfer the sum, in cash, to a lodging house in Marlborough Street, where there is a vacancy, and return the balance into your hands."

Brooding, Havershaw strove to find the key to the trick. Instinct told him that Stalker was up to something. But if he had indeed made a friend of McAlmond's son then the matter could not be casually dismissed. Havershaw did not doubt that Stalker was quite capable of infiltrating that august group of students which, so he'd heard, formed this year's university clique. By all accounts, young McAlmond was a dunderhead, and an idler to boot. The path to riches lay through such juvenile contacts. Swiftly, Havershaw reached a decision which involved a radical change of attitude on his part.

Climbing from the chair, he rounded the desk and administered an avuncular arm to Stalker's shoulder, though the contact almost made him flinch. "Progress, Stalker: ah, progress! I'm pleased that you have made friends in our city."

"And the letter, sir?"

"Horn will draft it and I will sign it. You may handle the transaction. The balance of rental need not be returned. Call it, ah, countenance money."

"Thank you, sir."

"Good, ah, luck, Stalker."

Stalker nodded, curtly. He did not need luck.

"By the way, when do you, ah, intend to exchange your place of residence?" asked Gow Havershaw.

"This afternoon," young Andrew Stalker said.

"May I walk with you, Fraser?"

"By all means, young Stalker. Not much of an afternoon for a perambulation, though."

"I'm going in your direction."

"Are you, indeed? Found a little doxy in my part of town, have you?"

"I'm lodging in Marlborough Street."

"I say, that's handy."

"Hm?" said Drew.

"You can pop round for a spot of supper," McAlmond said. "Not more than a step or two from my chambers, y'know."

"Really!" said Drew. "Ah, yes, of course, Morningside, isn't it?"

The young men walked twenty yards in silence, the grey, mist-fettered afternoon opening to a vista of the Salisbury Crags, the hillock of Arthur's Seat like a faded silhouette behind motionless veils of smoke. Even the wheels of the street carts seemed muffled by thick felt.

"Class examinations soon," Drew said.

"Hum," said McAlmond. "Hum-hum-hum!"

"Shouldn't be too bad, takin' it all in all."

"Not for you, perhaps."

"I'm sure you'll do well, Fraser."

"I'm *not* so sure."

"Torts are the problem, are they not?"

"I really cannot hold everything in my mind at once, Stalker: a facility you seem to have developed."

"Perhaps because you do not understand the function of the various parts of law."

"I do not understand Torts, if that's what you mean. The Lord knows, I've tried."

"Once you grasp the principle," said Drew, "the mental retention of relative facts becomes much easier. The law, in that respect, is like mathematics, a science of cause and effect, with, admittedly, a liberal sprinkling of anomalies."

"Perhaps it's the sprinkling of anomalies that throws me off my stride."

"Pardon my bluntness, Fraser," Drew said. "But Hector suggested that it will not go well with you — parentally, that is — if your results are less than favourable."

"Mellish told you that, did he?"

"He happened to hint at it," Drew said, cautiously.

"What's it to you, in any case?"

"I consider you enough of a friend to speak frankly," Drew said. "Perhaps it's a little presumptuous of me, but I feel that you have much talent and that it merely needs . . . encouragement to blossom forth."

McAlmond had long nursed similar sentiments. Eagerly he said, "I say, that's deuced perceptive of you, young Stalker."

"First year, second term," said Drew.

"Hm? What?"

"If I might suggest it, Fraser, it's best to keep ahead of the landslide."

"What landslide?"

"First year, third term," Drew said.

McAlmond halted. They were half way down hill towards the sheep meadows around which the gigs and phaetons of the very rich clicked neatly.

"Do please explain yourself, Stalker?"

"Cram *now*, Fraser, or you *will* go under."

"You whippersnapper!" McAlmond said, without venom. "Are you implying that I don't know how to conduct my career as a student?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll be damned!" McAlmond extended his short, military-style cane and poked Drew in the chest with it. "I may not know much about Torts, but I can recognise a proposition when I hear one. Out with it."

"I will act as your crammer, now and in future. I will furnish you with cribs, and . . ."

"Cribs, you say! Cribs are dangerous."

"Do you want to fail?"

"Go on, go on."

"I will explain everything that comes down to us and provide full lecture notes."

"*And* sit my examinations, I suppose."

"That's not possible, nor necessary," said Drew. "To be blunt about it, I'm offering you a valuable service."

McAlmond swung the stick and laid it across Drew's shoulder, cocking his handsome head to study the boy quizzically.

"What if I feel that I do not need the help of a fellow student? I can *hire* a crammer, you know: the very best crammer in the city."

"He will force you to study."

"And you won't?"

"One hour of your undivided attention per evening, that's all I'll require of you," Drew said, confidently. "And, before the finals in the last term, two weeks of cloistered study."

"What do you ask in exchange? A fee?"

"Please," said Drew, as if the idea of taking money from a university fellow offended him. "I'm not qualified to receive payment. I'll do it, Fraser, out of friendship."

McAlmond swung the cane away and, turning, strode off down the hill, saying, "Come along, Stalker."

It was a ruse, of course. Drew recognised it immediately. McAlmond was taunting him, endeavouring to force him to plead, to array his 'terms' for the services offered. He wouldn't rise to that bait, though. He caught up with the elegant young man and fell into step beside him, waiting, saying nothing.

Fifty yards further on, McAlmond stopped again. He shouldered the cane and stuck his gloved hand into his topcoat pocket. "Just what *do* you want?"

"Accommodation."

"Ah!" said McAlmond, relieved. "Why?"

"So that I may take my patron's quarterly grant and spend it in a more useful manner, on clothes, for instance, and on a little self-indulgence. To be honest, Fraser, I'm not cut out for a 'stinking garret' sort of existence."

"You're a shrewd little jackanapes, Stalker."

"You have a double parlour in the basement of your house. Your man-servant uses only one room of it."

"How the devil?"

"Balfour Sprott told me. Why waste the space?"

"Why, indeed!" said McAlmond, shrugging. "A free comfortable lodging for you, and a crammer on the premises for me."

"In short, yes."

"I think," said McAlmond, twisting the cane over his shoulders to rest both hands upon it like a barbell, "I really do think that I had *best* do you this favour, Stalker."

"There is no obligation — other than friendship."

"And my need to do well in class?"

"Is it agreed?" said Drew.

"My hand on it."

Inwardly Drew sighed with relief as he shook Fraser McAlmond's hand. He was clear at last of the unpleasant entanglements of the Old Town's wynds, of Heather Campbell and her alleged pregnancy.

The lesson would be well learned. He would not fall into that self-indulgent trap again. Indeed, he had come out of it well, magnificently well. Within a week he would be rooming with the famous Fraser McAlmond, and within a term, he promised himself, he would have the influential young dandy eating out of his hand.

In a region of ugly, smoke-spewing towns Grossby, twenty miles out of Leeds, was by any standards, the ugliest. Barricaded on one flank by the desolate range of Limewell Rise and on the other by a canal, its narrow streets, back-to-back hovels and massive cotton mills were crushed into an area so confined that no glimmer of sunlight ever penetrated there. Throughout the county the township was known as the Dark Parish.

Mirrin's high hopes of finding lucrative employment vanished within a couple of days of her arrival in Grossby. Red-cheeked and strong after her months in the fields, she was, however, signed on in the picking shed of Truesdales' Mill at a wage of eight shillings a week. Over half of this sum was immediately transferred back into the mill owner's coffers in return for 'provender and lodging', both of which, on meanest terms, the benefactor provided whether his employees wished it or not. The food was swill, the lodgings nothing but a palliasse on the floor of a 'dormitory' cellar at the rear of the mill, under that oppressive retaining red-brick wall.

The Brummidges had advised Mirrin to travel further south. "Easier to get into a mill town than to get out of it," Mr. Brummidge had informed her.

But she had almost run out of cash on the slow journey south and was afraid that she would wind up penniless and jobless. No, she had told the kindly carters, Grossby would have to do.

She should have heeded the Brummidges. The miserable dwellings, built on a slope like goblin-holes, faced on to streets and alleys that were hardly more than sewers. Squadrons of children played among the ordure, chasing rats and cats and skeletal mongrels, or fighting over some crushed piece of fruit or vegetable husk that had miraculously appeared in the barren waste.

Truesdales' Mill swallowed Mirrin Stalker alive. The process of ingestion was rapid. Four days as a sweeper, then shifted to the picking frames, Mirrin found herself sucked into a treadmill of dust, dirt, stink and noise that, within a single week, deadened not only her nerves but her will. The most pitiless aspect of Blacklaw had been paradise compared to the slavery of Grossby's insatiable looms.

The cotton frame, result of the American Civil War, had brought benefits to the workers in many mill towns, improved conditions in manufactories vying for trade. The Truesdale 'family', however, had cannily ignored both famine and progress, maintaining their equipment at minimum cost, until the premises degenerated into a relic of the worst type of 'liddle mill', unchanged for half a century.

Mirrin's partner at the picking frame was Faye Ashcroft, thirty-year-old wife of an unemployed weaver. Faye had three young children and a fourth, as she put it, 'in the oven'. Lifting of heavy wads of cotton from the slashed bales cost her much effort now, whips of pain beneath which even her indomitable stoicism wilted.

Mirrin brandished the heavy flexible picking sticks, three feet in length, and, in spite of her own fatigue, said, "Let me do the pluckin', just for a couple of days. I need t'learn, you know."

"I'm capable."

"Do me the favour," said Mirrin.

The woman seemed about to argue then, annoyed by her own understandable debility, nodded. "Just for today then, lass."

A warning hiss from down the length of the frames indicated that an overlooker was on the warpath. Mirrin had already had her knuckles cracked for blethering. She clenched her teeth and concentrated on her task.

Raw cotton was broken down by draping hanks on a slatted wood frame, battening them by stretched cords, and thrashing them until the fibres loosened and seeds, leaves and other detritus shook through into ground-level trays. In principle a simple enough job: in practice the thickly matted cotton resisted all but the beater's most strenuous efforts.

"Solid rock," Mirrin declared, pounding furiously.

"Give it here," Faye Ashcroft said, resignedly. "If the bleedin' stuff won't split an' shred then you've got t'rake it with your fingers. See, like this."

Mirrin watched as the Ashcroft woman tore at the wadding mounded between the cords. She waited until Faye had roughened the smooth, implacable surface of the stuff, then fell to flogging it again with the pliant sticks. She had no sense of rhythm. It was more exhausting than picking neeps in a farmer's field, more monotonous than sorting at a colliery trough.

Faye said, "The overlooker's got his eye on you, Mirrin. Speed it up."

By the end of her third day's labour, Mirrin's nails were broken to the quick and her arms ached so much that every small gesture, even the scrape of her spoon in her dinner bowl, sent pain shooting through her shoulders into the base of her skull.

At night she dozed fitfully, too exhausted to sleep. She remembered how Mam had taken her hands after her first day-shift at the pithead troughs and had bathed the bleeding knuckles and soothed and smoothed the skin with an ointment and comforted her, saying, "It'll get better, Mirrin. You'll see, it'll get better." But it had not improved. Her hands had roughened, not her heart.

By the end of a week, Mirrin had developed a cough, stimulated by the filigree particles of lint which floated like a haze in the atmosphere of the crowded ill-ventilated shed. That fibrous vapour, seeded with tiny itching granules, seemed to coat her skin, her hair and infiltrate deep into her chest and lungs. She could taste nothing but oily cotton. It was not merely uncomfortable: it was lethal, a slow route to the grave.

On Thursday afternoon, that first week in November, the thud of a falling body disturbed the clattering, battering flails and brought women running to a frame midway up the row.

The slumped girl was hardly older than herself, Mirrin noted, though an empurpled complexion and the strangled writhings of her limbs made it difficult to assess her age.

"What's wrong with her?" Mirrin asked.

Two older women bent over their companion. They ignored Mirrin's naïve question, working busily but without panic.

"Head back: push her head back."

"Can yet get at it?"

"Eee! Lookee there."

"What is it?" Mirrin asked again.

Then she saw.

The recumbent girl's jaw was yanked open. Two hooked fingers were thrust to the roots of her tongue and, after much groping on the nurse's part and much gagging and retching on the part of the patient, a long slimy strand of teased cotton waste was extracted from her gullet.

Nausea gripped Mirrin. She doubled over, wrapping her arms around her stomach. The taste of the lint in her own mouth frightened her. She choked on it. The older women chuckled and one crone laughed. With horror, Mirrin looked into the old woman's mouth and saw that the membranes were ingrained with that greyish speckling.

The crone gaped, pointing a stump-like finger into her mouth, then said, gleefully, "Never see'd that afore, 'ave ye, luv? Never see'd none o'them bouncin' an' jumpin' 'til they choked on cotton, eh? Plugs big as yor fist I see'd cut out o'them. When I war yor age I'ad me throat slit wi' a gully-knife t'pull the plug out an' save me life."

Mirrin reeled back to her frame and slumped against it. Her mouth was arid, her throat constricted. The shed swam before her eyes. Overlookers were scolding the women back to work. Even the girl, the victim who had been on the point of suffocation a few moments before, was being roughly dragged to her feet.

"God! God!" Mirrin sought to gulp air but the realisation of what she would inhale with it prevented her. Her throat spasmed.

Faye Ashcroft patted her solicitously. "Don't think about it, luv. First sight's the worst. Got the plug out, didn't they? Do the same for you."

Mirrin bowed her head, pressed her tongue to the roof of her mouth and tried to breathe only through her nostrils. It was easy enough at rest but with the exertions of flailing she knew that she would have to suck in the foul, mote-filled, killing air of the shed.

An image of the past rose, ironically, in her mind. One Christmas, when she was young, the minister had treated faithful Sunday School attenders to a soirée in Northrigg hall. Kate had been there, and James; even wee Dougie. They had eaten raisins and oranges, listened to recitations and sang songs to a melodeon accompaniment. But what she recalled most vividly was a conjurer who, having caused a roll of bright silk ribbon to vanish into his fist, magicked its reappearance from his mouth, unfurling it yard by yard from the back of his throat. Nobody had cheered more loudly than Mirrin. It had been years before she realised that the trick had been done by sleight-of-hand. Now it might be done in reality, by any one of the hundred women in the shed — or by herself.

"Stop it, lass," Faye Ashcroft advised. "Stop thinkin' about it. Here, lift them flails an' get on with yer work."

Don't think: work! That was all she could now do, Mirrin told herself. Work: don't think! Don't dare think! A feverish energy possessed her and, snatching up both sticks, she hammered and thrashed at the stripped cotton on its bond frame until sweat beaded her brow and dripped down her nose and her breath rasped in her throat and the oily taste of lint was salted down and the thought of rest, of death, late or soon and by any means at all, was no longer to be feared but welcomed.

Mirrin soon lost all track of time. Hours dripped into days, days, for all she could tell, accumulated into weeks. There was nothing to life but the mill and the flailing of rods on the frames. Work at Blacklaw's chutes or in the tinkers' lines had never been so stultifying or so physically damaging as the labour extracted by Truesdales' overlookers. Mill-hands assured her that there were worse occupations. Mirrin could not imagine them. Even her few brief hours of sleep huddled each night under an overcoat in the damp, verminous dormitory, were racked by spasms of coughing and dreams of the picking shed so lurid that the girl jerked and thrashed upon the mattress and obtained no rest for her tortured muscles. If it had been possible to save even a few shillings she would have walked out and taken her chances on the road again. But, so invidious was the tarriff system, that Mirrin could save not so much as a farthing and, frightened beyond reason by tales of illness and starvation, fell deeper into bondage, sick in soul as well as body.

The Scotch lass was only one of many suffering illness. Fevers and dysentery were encouraged by bad food, foul water and lack of proper sanitation. Women reeled about the shed like walking skeletons, sagging over the frames in states nearer to death than exhaustion. The overlookers were merciless, protecting their own jobs, jealous of their power and few extra 'bits o' brass'. They yelled and jabbered and poked the culprits with their billy-sticks and paid off a dozen hands each day, casting them into the outer darkness of penury and probable death.

If she had been stronger, the rebellious streak in Mirrin would have come to her rescue. She would have displayed her former political fervour in such an overt manner that she would have been run out of Truesdales' as a militant radical. But Mirrin did not have the strength to fight a battle of principles. Even her obstinacy had been reduced to a shuffling thing that moved her no further towards mutiny than tight-lipped silence whenever the billy rapped her knuckles or shoulders. In her debilitated state she imagined that her protection of Faye Ashcroft was an act of retaliation against the system, instead of responsive kindness towards a person in even more desperate straits than she was herself.

Though her baby was not due for seven or eight weeks, Faye Ashcroft's stomach was gigantically swollen. Mirrin, who had never seen such malformation before, was appalled at the condition and at the fear which drove the woman to continue her exertions at the picking frames. The positions she contrived to give the flails clearance and, Mirrin suspected, to ease her internal pains, were grotesque. Each night this woman returned to a house no bigger than a closet, to three demanding children and the tender mercies of a husband whose only thought now was for the money that would be lost to him, and by extension to the local publicans, when his wife's time of deliverance arrived. Time of deliverance? There was no such thing. It was a myth as distant and remote as heaven. Even if the babe should, somehow, be born into this world alive, its chances of survival would be infinitesimal. It might even be 'helped' back to join the cherubim some dark night by its father's drunken antics.

"Here, Faye, lean on me."

"Nay, nay, lass."

"Rest up a while. They won't see."

"They'll see. They see all."

Did they see, Mirrin wondered, the flushed cheeks and dry skin, scalding lungs and feeble limbs? Aye, the overlookers saw all right and, she imagined, sniggered at the changes that the weeks had made, chalking her off already as one too weak to last the pace, another 'failure', a score for the system. How long could she go on like this, burned by fever, drained by the deep lung-wrenching cough, sapped of all volition?

When Faye Ashcroft fell, Mirrin dropped the sticks and endeavoured to support her, but the woman slumped heavily against her, pushing Mirrin down on to the coarse bed of greasy raw cotton, pinning her. They balanced there like drunks sprawled on a sagging fence, arms entwined, cheeks touching, Faye's mouth wide open. She might have been laughing, but the sound was more subtle, a sifting throttle, very deep and soft and furtive as if her unborn child had whimpered discontentedly in her womb, once before dying and, in dying, had selfishly summoned his mother to the grave for company. The grey encrustations round her lips were stained with blood. Mirrin knew at once that Faye Ashcroft was dead.

The billy was wielded by a hard-faced sow of a woman, the longest-serving overlooker on the company's books. She had survived and endured. Latterly she had learned to enjoy the privileges of her rank, developing the streak of meanness that had hallmarked her as a born plenipotentiary, part of the force that protected the owners from the workers.

The first blow struck Faye Ashcroft across the small of the back. Already dead, Faye was beyond the reach of pain. Mirrin did not react impulsively as she would have done six weeks or even a month before. She needed now to think it out, to choose between negative descent into selfishness — a heartlessness of which she was, perhaps, capable and which would have stood her in good stead — and the avowal that, even in the lowest depths there is a point at which the human animal must stand for dignity.

"She's dead, miss," Mirrin said.

"Ay, I've heard that tale before."

"She is: look: she's dead."

The overlooker scowled and prodded the billy-stick between Mirrin and the pregnant woman's chest, prizing them apart. Levering, she altered the balance of the corpse and dispassionately watched Faye Ashcroft's body slide to the floor at the base of the picking frame. She touched the body with her boot, flopping it over.

"Ay, she's dead, right enough."

Mirrin lay back on the frame, thinking, at that moment, of nothing but the relief of rest, sharing vicariously the peace that Faye enjoyed, beyond the reach of fear and care and pain.

The billy thudded on her breast.

"You," the overlooker said. "Back t'yer work. The bosses don't pay ye t'mourn."

The sow would bear the scar for the rest of her life. Another inch and Mirrin might have killed her. As it was, sudden horror increased her energy, focussed it on the one object, and shaped her action.

Ripping the billy from the overlooker's hand, Mirrin struck with it, snapping it down across the bridge of the woman's nose. Blood spurted and flowed, an effusion that by its warmth and brightness, melted Mirrin's indifference to the callousness of Faye Ashcroft's passing.

Shouting, Mirrin raised the stick again. If she struck even one more blow, however, she would condemn herself for ever to the sort of viciousness that enabled Truesdales' mills to clack on at full volume. In disgust, she tossed the billy away and, hands clasped to her head, ran unimpeded down the length of the shed, out through the haze which clouded the doorway and into the oily daylight beyond.

The side door led to a lane. The lane was empty. No hue and cry of overlookers, foremen or owners' managers trailed her, though Mirrin, haunted by the enormity of her crime, was obsessed by the feeling that she was the object of Truesdales' collective vengeance. She tottered down the lane between soaring walls of weathered red brick towards another wall above which the symbols of the mill town lofted into the grey sky; chimney stacks, Grossby's equivalent of Blacklaw's winding towers.

Reeling, she fled as fast as her legs would carry her through the brick maze, suffocated by heat for a yard or two then shaken by cold. Her shoulders and arms ached. She shook her head in an effort to concentrate, to reach decisions, find direction. Her coat and skirt and few personal belongings were still in the dormitory. She could think of no course of action which would allow her to retrieve them without running foul of authority and risk being arrested for having dared strike an overlooker.

Halting, she groped in panic at her waist, found her money roll and, weeping with relief, sank against the wall and fumbled out the little sack. Squatting, she spilled the meagre collection of coins on the ground and, head bent, sweat pouring from her brow, concentrated on counting them.

Eleven pence was all that she owned in the world. She blinked stupidly. How much could she do with that? Buy a ticket out of Grossby — a ticket to another town, another stinking city. She was owed four days' wages. Could she somehow collect them? Remembering the gush of blood from the pig-faced woman's nose, she discarded any hope of acquiring her dues. The wages were gone, gone like everything else. I must *walk* to another town, she told herself, rising. I *must* find work. I can't do *anything* without work. I *must* earn money to keep myself alive. She looked down the lane at the chimneys' plumes of smoke, haphazardly choosing that direction at the lane's end.

Nothing seemed real, solid. Even the ground beneath her feet shifted and trembled as if it was the crust of a quaking lava bed.

She knew she was ill. Acknowledgment of that most obvious of facts steadied her a little and gave her an objective. She could do nothing until she cured herself, broke the fever which raged in her veins. The eleven pence must be spent on medicinal powders to clear her head and ease her distress, to buy a remedy and find a fourpenny lodging to lie up in until she recovered sufficiently to get out of Grossby and back on the road. Elevenpence would not go far. Worry roared back into her mind, enlarged by fever into yammering fear.

Every moment was precious. She must begin at once to be rid of the illness, to start on the road to recovery, the road to health and strength, the road to another picking shed, or a loom, or a coalpit chute.

She must find a pharmacy. She veered right at the lane's end and emerged from the mill area into the top of the town.

It was coming on towards dusk now, though the clock in the chapel tower said it was not yet four. Gas lamps had been lighted and whatever sun there had been had sunk behind the crags of Limewell rise. The canal was like a trench of dross below her, the mean tiers of houses drenched in the same brown hue. She felt light now, indifferent to direction. She would find what she sought in time. All her urgency had been left behind in the red-brick [illegible]

Hamilton was a nice town. She could be home in half an hour. Betsy worked in Hamilton. Betsy would take her home. Mam would tuck her up in bed in the back room with a hot lemon drink and a piggie at her feet. When she was better, Kate would bring her gruel and coddled eggs and soup, sit on the edge of the bed and feed her with a spoon. And Da would come in and see her when he got off the shift. And she would hear James and Dougie laughing and Mam telling them to *shush*. And maybe Rob would come too. She liked Rob. He would cheer her up almost as much as James and Dougie. She would be safe with her family and friends, snug out of the cold streets in her own bed in the back room of the narrow house. Where was it now? Where was the road home, the road back, into the happy past?

Not Hamilton! Grossby, England.

The lamps were brighter, the last of the daylight fading fast. She moved aimlessly, floating like lint, on down the narrow cobbled street towards the crowded square where the pharmacy would be, if there was a pharmacy.

Folk approached her, then sheered away, noticing her flushed cheeks and dazed, shining eyes. Typhoid and influenza were starting up in towns not thirty miles away. Couldn't be too careful.

Houston would come in his carriage, rattling out of that lane by the town hall. He would rein to a halt and leap from the seat and gather her in his arms and take her into the warm, leather-smelling interior of the coach and hold her while the coach rocked, and rocked her all the way home, home in Houston's arms.

The cobbler's shop she recognised by the rap of the hammers, the draper's by the *ping* of the bell above the door. The lights of the windows shone brilliantly, blindingly, making her head and eyes ache. Next was the butcher's, the nauseating stench of raw meat, pig and mutton and skeins of ox-tripe draped like Turkish towels across the entrance. Sickness rose in her gorge. She thrust her hands to her mouth, turning modestly away from the women at the shop doormouth to cough phlegm into the gutter.

As she stooped, the pavement tilted and formed a coil, the people on it poked out like spokes on a broken wheel. She was the axis, the cobbled street the rim, trundling, spinning, faster and faster, rolling with a deafening, lurching, cracking sound. It was all Mirrin could do to reel to the inside of the pavement again and grab at the heavy iron staves which mounted guard between the shops and the first of the brown brick houses. Hooking her elbow around the post, she clung there, upright now only by sheer effort of will.

Though her eyes were wide open and contemplated the street, her brain played cruel tricks. Her vision was blurred by the image of a huge green field in which stood effigies of her past, motionless, wooden, dead: her Da, poor Loonie Lachie who had lived in Blacklaw and been happy there once, and Houston, Rob, Callum Ewing, even Tom Armstrong.

Were they all dead now? Oh, God! How many more had died? Tilting her head, squinting to find reality in her waking nightmare, she caught sight of James in the bizarre Aunt Sally crowd. As a cloud moved silently and smoothly across the green field and darkened it to dun, she saw her elder brother walk from the row of wooden figures, then run, diminishing in stature as he approached.

The field was gone. The street restored itself, and the figures were the figures of inhospitable strangers: all except one. James was still there, small, child-like, staring at her out of his piercing blue eyes, not smiling. That one fragment of her hallucination refused to vanish like the rest. Of them all, she *knew* that James was dead, dead and buried and at rest.

But even he did not recognise her? Had she fallen so far in grace that not even her dear brother would acknowledge her and welcome her to the realms of the hereafter?

"James?" she said.

He ran on, the boy that she had mistaken for her brother scampered on. But she could not relinquish him, her last ray of hope.

Reaching out, she cried piteously, "*Jaaaaammmmmesssss.*"

The small boy stopped abruptly and turned to stare back at her, uncertain and half afraid.

"Edward, come here." The voice was not peevish but firm and maternal.

Lifting her head Mirrin struggled to focus on the woman who had summoned the child and who, two or three yards from her now, had also become wooden, trapped too in that distorted world of the past.

"*Oh, my God! It's our Mirrin!*"

Amazement did not veil the warmth and pity in the woman's tone, nor disguise its comforting familiarity. Suddenly Mirrin recognised the features of Lily Dawson Stalker, her brother James's widow, and the small, serious face of Edward.

"Mam, Mam, who is it?"

"Mirrin Stalker, son: your Auntie Mirrin," Lily answered. "Edward, run back int' the house there and fetch your Grandpa. *Quick.*"

Sighing, Mirrin pitched forward into Lily's arms.

Eight

Mirrin's return to consciousness was gradual. For a long time before she opened her eyes, she travelled a road that was dark and twisting, past fields and hedges and cottages peopled with half-forgotten faces. She seemed to see a child perched on a stool beside her. But even as she attempted to focus on him and relate the little boy to the dark places, he pulled away and she was left wandering in the clouds that piled around her, shadows that canalised into ditches full of brown smoke that, softly now, raised themselves up into the likeness of chimney stacks and tilted winding towers.

Several times she attempted to struggle awake. Once she thought she heard voices, felt hands upon her shoulders. For most of that period, however, everything remained vague, and she was content to allow herself to be borne along, knowing that no positive action was demanded of her.

Finally when she became curious enough to open her eyes she viewed her surroundings with a surprising lucidity. Daylight fell in geometric shapes through a skylight set in a steeply sloping ceiling. The angle of rake immediately informed her that she had not somehow been miraculously transported home again.

No house she'd ever been in had a roof plane like that. It was a small room, furnished with a rather ornate bed. Brass knobs at head and foot reminded her of Russian palaces. A corner chiffonier looked to be walnut but turned out later to be best quality *papier mâché* imitation. The narrow upright bed-table had a chintz frill round it and the room's one chair, a comfortable miniature recliner, was covered with identical material. Along the base of the loping ceiling the wall had been papered in a floral-cape design. Pleased with her visual exploration, Mirrin closed her eyes again nd dozed.

The chime of a spoon on a dish wakened her. She eased herself on to her elbow. She had no difficulty now in separating fact from everish fantasy. She identified the young woman and the little oy at once.

"Lily! I thought I was dreamin'."

"So did I, I can tell you, luv," Lily replied. "I mean, what way vas that t'come visitin' relatives, on your back in the public ighway."

"But, Lily . . ."

"Hup, Mirrin: not a word, not 'til you've tucked away all this oup. It's what the doctor ordered; plenty liquids."

"How long've I been here?"

"Not so long, really. Couple of days."

"Two days!"

"Don't excite yourself, luv. We're not chargin' you by the ight," Lily said. "Here, drink."

Hoisting her into a sitting position, Lily spooned the warm iquid between Mirrin's parched lips. To Mirrin's surprise Lily ept up a stream of inconsequential chatter, saying how much the utcher charged for bones compared with Scotland, and how hard t was to get wee Edward to take his nourishment, and look at Auntie Mirrin wasn't she good to eat all her soup and not a word of complaint. Edward, who had presumably gazed his fill on Mirrin and already formed his opinion of this surprising 'auntie', got down on the floor to amuse himself by playing with a tobacco in full of odd buttons.

When the soup was finished and Lily had wiped Mirrin's hands and face with a cool wash-cloth, Mirrin flatly rejected her sister-in-law's suggestion that she cuddle down for another nap.

"I feel as if I'd been asleep for a month, Lily. Tell me, where am I?"

"Grossby," Lily said. "This is m'father's place, a boarding-house."

"I thought your Da worked in the mills?"

"He decided he didn't want t'die before his time. Packed it in."

"But the money?"

"To buy this place, y'mean? He borrowed it. He'd some saved up, an' took out a note on the United Bank for the balance. He wagered on hard work payin' off. It has too."

Mirrin shook her head in bewilderment. "Business on his own. That's what a man should do."

"It was a real shock t'see you lyin' there, Mirrin. I near died."

"That makes two of us."

"Folk round here are shy of strangers: aye, an' wary of anythin' that even resembles typhoid."

"What was the diagnosis?"

"Influenza," said Lily. "Compounded by malnutrition, the doctor said. God, I never thought I'd see the day a Stalker would suffer from that."

"I've been workin' in Truesdales'."

"We guessed that by the state you were in. The pickin' sheds can destroy a buddy faster than any colliery job. I take it they flung you out when you got too sick t'work?"

Mirrin nodded: she could not be bothered with explanations just yet.

In the crowded months since she'd left Blacklaw in the wake of James's death and the stillbirth of her second child, Lily had changed. She was more mature, though less pretty than she had been when James brought her proudly home to Blacklaw after his one and only foray out of Scotland in search of fame and fortune, a year's gut-empty, footsore tramp round the black spots of England that had stilled disenchantment with Blacklaw for ever.

"I'll be up an' away in a day or so," said Mirrin.

"You'll be up when the doctor gives you the word, an' not an hour before."

"Lily, I can't impose on . . ."

"Hark't her!" Lily exclaimed. Edward peeped hopefully over the end of the bed to see what his eccentric aunt was up to now. "Impose! The Stalkers pulled me through when things was at their blackest for me. Oh, God, aye! I'll admit I was bitter at the time, but not towards the family, only at Lamont an' his damned pit."

If James had been present in that room he would not have approved of Lily's language, especially within the boy's earshot. It was part and parcel of Lily's changed personality, a bluffness that often came after great loss and suffering. Mirrin could appreciate it now. She wondered, languidly, how much change the people back home would notice in her when she returned. She would have to return now. As soon as she could get herself back on her feet, she would make a beeline for the Scottish border and Blacklaw. Even thinking about home brought tears to her eyes.

"This bed's big enough for both of us, 'til the house gets busy nearer Christmas," said Lily. "You're goin' nowhere for a month at least."

"Lily, I . . ." Mirrin sniffed.

Edward watched, uncertainly.

"Ah, Lily," Mirrin sobbed. "You're so kind t'me. I could've died there in the street, a strange, foreign street. It's good t'see a friendly face."

"How long've you been on the road?"

"Six months, near seven."

"Did you run away?"

"No, not really. What makes you think that?"

Lily grinned. "This chap you kept bletherin' about."

Mirrin's eyes creased with apprehension. "What . . . what chap?"

"Tom Armstrong, y'called him," said Lily. "I thought maybe you'd run off with him, like."

Mirrin laughed, wheezy still, at the ridiculousness of Lily's conjecture. "Tom Armstrong's a tink."

"Tink or not, he's still a man," Lily said. "Is he nice?"

"Nice enough. But he was never mine."

"Tink?" said Edward from the brass cage at the bed-end. "Tink?"

"A gypsy," said Mirrin. "Don't y'know about gypsies, Edward?"

"Noooooaaaaah."

Mirrin winked. "I'll tell you some grand tales about the tinkers, when I'm stronger."

"Tonight?"

"Maybe tomorrow," Mirrin said. "We'll have a right old chin-wag, you an' me, Edward."

Edward giggled. "Chin-wag," he said, giggling louder. "Chin-wag."

"Right you, m'lad," Lily said, firmly but not severely. "Out. Auntie Mirrin wants t'sleep."

"Auntie Mirrin sleeps?"

"Aye, son," Mirrin said. " 'Til tomorrow."

The boy was reluctant to leave, until, by the only means at his disposal, he had given the woman a sign of his acceptance. Coming up the side of the bed he held out his hand and, solemnly, dropped a shiny red object into Mirrin's palm.

"Have a button, Auntie Mirrin." He was a little puzzled when his new-found aunt wept again.

Ernest Dawson was shovelling potatoes from a bunker set in a corner of the clean, cluttered kitchen when his daughter returned from attending the invalid. He scowled at her, his smooth flabby cheeks flushed with irritation and his brows, grey as badgers' brushes, knitted together over his fleshy nose.

"It's about time you got down here, Lily." An avalanche of small spuds rattled into the wooden bucket. "Vegetables to be prepared, custard to make."

"It'll be done, father," said Lily, patiently.

"Can't do everything m'self, while you're dancin' attendance on that one, up there."

"She's asleep now."

Dawson grunted, levelled the potatoes with his shovel and gestured to Lily to carry the load. "She's not stayin' here, mind you. Each and every room in this here house has to pay its way, like. I don't have no charity beds for vagrants."

Anger glittered in Lily's eyes. Before she could move to Mirrin's defence — not for the first time — her mother entered the kitchen from the door that led out to the cavernous laundry rooms, holding a cotton bolster case before her like a flag of truce.

"Doesn't want it," Hilda Dawson said.

"What's wrong with it, like?" her husband demanded.

"Brought her own silks," Hilda said. "Ideas about bein' better than she is, that Mrs. Teape. Claims she's an admiral's widow, an' the silk cases come all the way from India."

Dawson smirked, his annoyance at Lily forgotten. "An admiral's wife! Jolly-hoh! A bargee's tart, more like. Are her cases *real* silk, dearest?"

Hilda nodded, folding the cotton case carefully to return to the airing cupboards which flanked the corridor of the drying room.

"Airs and graces. Her nether garments is patched like rags."

"I thought as much."

Hilda Dawson was a severe woman, pinched and angular. She matched her husband's asperity snipe for snipe, though comparative prosperity in recent years had caused him to grow bloated as she grew more rigidly skinny. They lived in harmony, however, sharing the same aspirations, the same sustaining snobbishness and bigotry. Having escaped from the ranks of the working class, the Dawsons held it now in awe and contempt and considered every parliamentary concession to the improvement of the common man's lot as 'mollycoddling'. They believed firmly in the gospel of Samuel Smiles. *Self-Help* was their Bible, the boarding-house and all its accoutrement, plus a safe little nest-egg in the Grossby Bank, living proof that only by their own efforts could persons raise and improve their lot.

Ernest Dawson continued his attack on Mirrin as Lily filled the bucket from the tap above the sink and, with the bristle broom kept for that purpose, chafed at the spuds to remove the outer layer of peel. In the corner under the zinc washing sink, Edward had been given a potato and four spent matches to play with, a regular part of the pre-dinner ritual.

"I don't see what you have against Mirrin," Lily said at length.

"She's a vagrant."

"She's my relative," Lily said.

"What will the other boarders say?"

"They've hardly noticed."

"We pride ourselves on keepin' our standards of the highest."

"An' the proof of that is that we have seven rooms out of ten let this week," Hilda said. "An' the Fowlers down at Number Twenty have only three."

"When she's on her feet again, out she goes," Dawson said.

"You can't mean that, father," Lily protested. "The Stalkers were good to me when I needed help."

"Good to you when you carried a Stalker child, y'mean," Ernest Dawson said. "You wouldn't have had to suffer at all if you'd wed Charles Probert, now would you?"

"Charles Probert never had any interest in me."

"Not true: not true. With a little bit of encouragement."

"Anyway, I don't like him: never did. He'd have married Claire Grantham, anyway, no matter what I did."

"Look at him, a fine handsome man," Hilda said. "A property owner in a big way. He rides with the Brambledale pack, y'know."

"I've seen him," Lily said. "Fat as a pig in his daft red coat."

"I suppose your collier was better?"

"Aye, he was: far better."

"Better now he's gone."

"Ernest!" warned Hilda, who knew when her husband was overstepping himself.

Lily sighed. The arguments were too familiar to hurt her much now. Matter-of-factly, she declared. "Well, if you put Mirrin out before she's ready to go, I leave with her — an' Edward, too, o'course."

"I'll need the room," Ernest Dawson said. "It's the busy season. The Talboys are comin'. We're fully booked."

"She can sleep with me," said Lily.

"Will she do a turn in the kitchen or at table?" Hilda asked.

"I expect so," said Lily. "When she's stronger."

Hilda and Ernest exchanged another glance, the woman encouraging the man's capitulation. Lily knew that her threat to leave, to remove Edward, upon whom her parents poured the affection that they had withheld from her, had been taken seriously.

"I'll look after her," said Lily. "I feel I'm payin' back some of what I owe. You can understand *that*, father, can't you?"

"Well, all right. But only 'til she's recovered, like. An' she's not t'show her nose out of her room. Hear? If that commercial gentleman in number six even caught sight of her . . ." Dawson shuddered at the contemplation of such a contingency.

Edward gave a short demanding cry, pouting for attention. Putting down the brush, Lily scooped up her son and planted a kiss on his soft warm cheek.

"Auntie Mirrin stayin'?" the child asked.

"Aye, Auntie Mirrin's stayin'," said Lily, firmly.

Drew Stalker and Daniel Horn had much in common. It had become quite a habit for the gentlemen to eat dinner in the cellar of the *Kenmore*, a short step from the High Street. The timing of the excursion was exact, of course, taking in only that period during which Gow Havershaw engaged in the partaking of luncheon, minus one half hour. Drew and Daniel Horn fed on cheese pie and ale. The younger man paid for the meal.

"So," Horn said, "it's McAlmond you're after."

"Not so," Drew replied. "I merely said that as I had received an invitation to Pearsehill over the Christmas vacation it would do no harm to be briefed beforehand."

"Who else will be there?" asked Horn.

"Hector Mellish."

"Mellish, aye: we have a record on his family."

"And the McAlmonds?"

"Not much, I fear. Just orthodox business."

The pair had no need to talk quietly, for the eating house was a rabble of voices, the conversations of clerks of all varieties rising like a plaint of crows under the square beams of the *Kenmore*'s ceiling.

Horn was a man deceptively aged by his vices, dried out like a mandrake root. He lived in a two-room apartment in the Canongate Road with two young women, and managed them as more lofty fellows might manage a pair of race horses, entering them only for select and high-paying events. Horn was forty-seven. He had served a short term as a garrison sergeant in the Queen's Own Foot back in the forties — or so he said — and had fought against the Sikhs in India. The sun had dried out his skin then and it had never recovered its proper tone, hanging on the bones of his face like charred parchment. He had entered the law, in the position of clerk, to escape the army, hiding out in Edinburgh in preference to his native Dumfries — or so he said. Drew did not believe a word of it.

Scooping the last wedge of his cheese pie into his mouth, Drew said, "Can you find out?"

"Find out what?" said Daniel Horn, who had finished victualling minutes before and was doing justice to a second mug of ale.

"Anything."

"Be precise, young Stalker."

"Come now, Daniel, you know the sort of thing I want."

"Ask your friend Fraser."

"He hardly knows how to wipe his nose," Drew said. "He is, believe me, incredibly stupid."

"You wish to impress the old man."

"I wish to be well thought of, yes."

"Then avoid brewing as a topic of conversation."

Drew laughed. "What do you suggest?"

"Cattle, crops."

"Cases?"

Horn sucked his teeth. "Agricultural Holdings Act: Land Transfer Act: Artisans' Dwelling Act. Archie probably won't understand those, and his sort are always impressed by what they don't comprehend."

"All well and good," Drew said.

"Luscombe and French handle the investments for the McAlmond estates. The bankers are the Capital Merchants."

"What about the wife?"

"She's connected to the Oakley fortune."

"Anything I should mull over?"

"Ancestral oddments. She's proud of the family."

"Political persuasions?"

"Die-hard Tory, o'course."

Drew nodded.

Horn wiped his lean chops with his knuckle. "Does Havershaw know you're invading Pearsehill?"

"Not yet."

"He who looks rich, gets rich," Horn said.

"Meaning?"

"Tap the boss."

"He won't open his purse."

"He might, for a larger share of the McAlmond pie."

"That," said Drew, "will take years t'slice."

"The boss can wait: patience is one thing he's learned."

"Will you drop a word?"

"Simple." Horn tapped his nose with his forefinger.

"And the information?"

"Also simple."

"May I leave it to you, Daniel?"

"Trust me, young Stalker."

"That," Drew said, "I'll never do."

"But when you open chambers of your own, you will take me on, won't you?"

"That goes without saying," Drew told the clerk. "*If* I ever manage to achieve that august status."

"You will, you will," Daniel Horn assured him.

"And if I don't?"

"We can go into partnership in a knocking shop."

"Quite!" Drew Stalker said, and winced.

The 'Admiral's Widow' had packed up and left before Mirrin Stalker recovered sufficient strength to interest herself in the affairs of the House of Dawson. The Dawsons were not sorry to see the widow woman go. They had been flummoxed by her rank and could not quite fathom into what category she should be placed. It made no matter in the long run, for the lady upped one morning, paid her bill and was gone in a hired fly no less, before Mirrin had come downstairs. The widow was replaced within the day by a travelling gent from Suffolk who bought and sold agricultural machinery. Edward did not take at all to the salesman, who had a squint in one eye and a curved calabash pipe that looked as if it had grown on to his jaw.

In addition to Mr. Quayle, 'the implementarian' as he styled himself, four other gentlemen of more or less 'commercial' bent were in temporary residence, plus a couple of ladies who had a six months' lease on the second-floor back. These ladies paid in advance and did business in the buying of musical instruments for their father and brothers down London way. More discreet prying, necessitated by the fear that the couple would lug pianos into their bedroom by cover of night, unearthed the fact that they had leased a store in Wolfram Street to keep their items in prior to shipping them south.

It was almost a fortnight after her first emergence from her room before Mirrin had much contact with the guests. The moment her feet touched the floor of the skylight room, Ernest Dawson made his appearance like a pantomime demon insisting with bald civility that she remove her belongings — referred to with a pointed sniff — to Lily's room and that she did not use the water-closet at the corridor's end after ten at night as the plumbing was not exactly silent and decent folk liked to sleep undisturbed.

Mirrin was glad enough to shift in with Lily and Edward. The room, quite large enough to accommodate all three, was already furnished with a double bed and a cot for the boy.

As Mirrin's energy increased, so did her gratitude to Lily and her willingness to draw the Dawsons' sting by working for her keep. Cheerfulness and her capacity for ordered labour and, perhaps, wee Edward's adoration, won over Ernest and Hilda in a short space of time.

In Mirrin, unexpectedly, they found the servant they had always sought, capable, uncomplaining and — probably — trustworthy. With her housekeeping experience, Mirrin soon made unobtrusive improvements upon the lodging-house economy. Most of all, however, the Dawsons warmed towards Mirrin because she so obviously 'knew her place'. For the first time in many months she was secure, comfortable and loved. She had no wish to endanger the sanctuary.

It was Edward who added the quality of love. The child transformed the prim boarding-house into a place full of warmth and laughter and united the diverse characters of his grandparents, his mother and his aunt in a kind of worship. He even distracted his grandpa, from time to time, from thoughts of money and advancement. Mirrin made Edward happy and kept him constantly amused. Thus, unwittingly, she softened the Dawsons' distrust of the collier's daughter, sister of the man who had lured their one-and-only away from a first-class marriage and all the status that went with it.

They did not even object when Mirrin filled the little boy's head with tales of gypsies and miners and refreshed his tender memory with questions and answers about his very early life in Blacklaw.

"What d'you remember most, son?"

"Grannie, an' Auntie Kate; an' Auntie Betsy givin' me sweets."

"What else?"

"Luggie."

"Who?"

"Luggie: Luggie."

"Who's Luggie?"

"The cat with the big ginger tail."

"Mrs. McPhail's cat. I'd forgotten."

"Luggie liked milk. I liked Luggie."

"Remember the picnics?"

"The eggs with faces."

"Easter Monday. It was rainin'. We all went into the wash-house an' had our dinner in there."

"Rolled eggs down the board, an' mine's broke."

"I remember."

"Me too," said Edward proudly.

But as to the dirt and the lung-disease, the horror of disaster sirens screaming out over Main Street, of poverty and many deaths, Mirrin did not enlighten her nephew. She could never quite screw up her nerve to ask if he recalled his father. The boy never mentioned his father nor his Stalker grandfather, though he had worshipped them both in his babyhood and copied them in his childish way. Mirrin wondered if he had somehow blanked out the loss and the bewilderment it must have caused in his little heart.

Sometimes when she talked with Edward she was beset by homesickness. Dormant recollections stole into her mind and lingered long after Edward had been packed off to bed and she was sewing cloths by the stove in the quietness of the winter evening.

She thought then of the girls of Blacklaw, the Sunday afternoon promenade up and down Main Street, faces scrubbed, hair brushed and ribboned, boots polished. Linked arm to arm, a troll net for suitors, they swung along, giggling at secret jokes, playing haughty for the benefit of the lads perched on the *Lantern*'s wall, flirting their eyes and their hips to draw jeers and cheers and the first adolescent growls of sexual hunger. Not long ago: yet an eternity. She was young still; yet her youth was gone, her girlhood at any rate. Since those dim days she had been rebel, lover, bread-winner and tinker. Now she was an Auntie, Edward's one and only available Auntie, a role she enjoyed.

"Mirrin, he won't go to sleep 'til you kiss him goodnight."

"Right."

She climbed the stairs, entered the room and seated herself on the foot of the big comfortable bed that overlooked the cot. She put the candle safe on the dresser where it would not shine in his eyes.

"Sing me a song, Auntie Mirrin."

She sang the first thing that came into her head, soft and sweet, the lively tune mellowed by a wistful irony that was mercifully lost on the little boy. His eyes peered sleepily up at her from above the hem of the patchwork quilt. The candlelight made his hair and lashes golden.

"Here we go the jingo-ring,
The jingo-ring, the jingo-ring,
Here we go the jingo-ring,
About the merry-ma-tanzie."

Edward opened his eyes wide, fighting sleep. "Merry-ma-tanzie? What's that?"

"Shush now," Mirrin said. "I'll tell you tomorrow."

"Auntie?"

"What?"

"Sing more."

"Guess ye wha's the young goodman,
The young goodman, the young goodman,
Guess ye wha's the young goodman,
About the merry-ma-tanzie."

"More."

Mirrin smiled, stroking her nephew's hair. She leaned forward, face close to his, her lips hardly moving, the game-song teased into a breathy, crooning lullaby, the way her Da had sung it to her when she was small.

"Honey is sweet, and so is he,
So is he, so is he;
Honey is sweet, and so is he,
About the merry-ma-tanzie."

"More."

But she sang no more words, stroking, humming gently in her throat, until the song was no song but just the assurance of her presence, and Edward drifted swiftly down into sleep.

"Mirrin?"

Startled, she looked round.

Lily stood by the door.

"Why did you sing that?" Lily asked.

"I . . ."

"Don't you remember?"

Then she remembered — the day of the wedding; all the long line of Stalkers, with the Ewings and the Pritchards and the Ormonds, even old misery McNeillage, a whole sprauckle of lassies and lads spilling out into the street from the Stalkers' house, joining hands and dancing and singing up hill. Ahead of them had been her brother James and his brand-new wife, Lily Dawson, a Stalker now. They had sung all the way up to the fresh-painted cottage that James had tithed. James and Lily, flushed and nervous, had played their part and skipped ahead. When the chain of wedding guests reached the cottage, James had lifted Lily in his arms and carried her in through the open door. The door was new-painted too, red as a rose, and shiny. He had turned with her, her arms about his strong neck and her head shyly hidden against his chest. He had grinned at his mates and winked at his Da and turned again and kicked the door with his heel, closing it tight. Then, Mirrin remembered, they all gathered in a circle out on the street, the crowd swelled by neighbours and acquaintances until it seemed that the whole town was there, and they sang.

"*Now they're married, we wish them joy,*
We wish them joy, we wish them joy;
Now they're married, we wish them joy,
About the merry-ma-tanzie."

And then the crowd had gone, laughing and gossiping, into the gloaming and the lamps of the town were lit. Mirrin had loitered curiously in front of the new cottage, wondering at the drawn curtains and the oil lamp burning, blurred behind the flowered cotton. Then Kate had come back to fetch her and take her home to share the succulent dumpling that Mam had made and to join in the general celebrations that rattled on far into the Saturday night.

"Aye, Lily, I remember," Mirrin said.

"I miss him, Mirrin: I miss him still."

"Aye, Lily," Mirrin said, and, taking her sister-in-law in her arms, consoled her while they recalled the happiness of a past that was dead and gone.

Nine

CHRISTMAS WAS NOT a season that brought much joy to Ernest Dawson's heart. While his guests, resident and temporary, were satisfied with plain, wholesome vittles throughout the year, the Yuletide brought a fit of gastronomic madness which drove all thought of economy from their minds. Grumbles rolled like thunder from the dining room down into the kitchen where Ernest's ears flared red as boiled beetroot at the slights cast upon his best culinary endeavours. What did they expect: turtle soup and fillet of veal, filberts and lark pie and flamin' French plums, all for a guinea a week? He did not grudge them a special little something on Christmas Day, but he could not be expected to feed them like fighting cocks from December first through to Twelfth Night. In reparation for the lack of variety, and as a fillip to the promise of a Grand Xmas Dinner, he was obliged to camouflage the customary run of mutton and veg with sauces and to provide, on alternate evenings, blancmange or jelly, or some similar colourful frippery. It was at this stage that Mirrin Stalker made the transition from skivvy to *maître d'hôtel*.

Five fowls, as tough and battered as a team of fairground pugilists, were purchased early by Ernest Dawson, before the price of birds soared sky-high. He hung them in the wood-shed, as if they were pheasants and not mere barn-door hens, while he debated what, in a week's time, he would do with them and how he would perform the miracle of feeding a score of hungry folk from such a scrawny flock. Of course, he would pad out with pies and tartlets and steamed currant pud, but the main course worried him so much that he lay awake at nights fretting in case his miserliness be considered mean. Fowler, at number twenty, was splurging on a goose but Dawson baulked at such needless expense and, though he surveyed the plump-breasted specimens in the poulterer's window, he could not summon up the nerve needed to put down hard cash for one. In any case, he had already paid for five boiling fowls.

Giggling, Lily told Mirrin of her father's dilemma, quite an annual circumstance as it happened. Mirrin chuckled too before she remembered, in a flood, the tricks that Mrs. Burns, Lamont's cook, had practised to pare down the budget.

Casually, the following morning, Mirrin raised the subject over the hurried breakfast that the family took together after all their guests had departed and greasy plates stood stacked for washing upon the trolley in the dining room.

She led Ernest into the subject easily. "Fine chickens you bought, Mr. Dawson."

"D'you think so, then?"

"I do," said Mirrin. "You'll be cookin' them in salad oil."

"Salad oil? Will I?"

"With some cuts of rabbit to add up to a fine plateful of pieces, disguised with mushrooms and a wine sauce."

"Wine?"

"Any old sort of wine," said Mirrin, "makes all the difference."

"I'm . . . er, not sure about the wine," said Ernest Dawson, as he dipped bread into the puddle of ham fat in the pan and chewed thoughtfully. "I . . . er, hadn't considered what t'do with the fowls, like, but that recipe sounds . . . possible."

"It'll look good on the menu."

"What menu?"

"You'll need a menu," said Mirrin. "Put a fancy French name on somethin' and it tastes better at once."

"I'm not much up on fancy French names."

"*Poulet à la Marengo*," said Mirrin. "A great big steamin' salver of chicken pieces interspersed with rabbit; the whole heap draped wi' a rich white wine sauce."

Ernest studied the girl. "How much would it cost?"

"You could do enough for twenty on a pound, plus the birds."

"Get away?"

Mirrin nodded.

"You've . . . made this dish before?" asked Ernest.

Mirrin nodded again, stretching the truth a little.

"Where?" said Hilda Dawson. "Not on a miner's stove, I'll be bound."

Lily joined in. "Mirrin was housekeeper t'a coalmaster for quite a while."

"Never!" said Hilda Dawson, exchanging glances with her husband.

So interested was he in the conversation that Ernest had almost swabbed the pan clean of fat. "You mean a maid?"

"A housekeeper," said Lily. "In charge."

"You never told us that, Mirrin," said Hilda.

"You never asked," said Mirrin.

"What other recipes do ye have, then?" said Ernest, trying to appear only faintly interested. "Ones suitable for the modest scale of our establishment?"

"Apple Snow," said Mirrin. "Tipsy cake, Hunters' Beef Stew—guaranteed to taste like venison. *Cod à l'Italienne.* None of them expensive."

"I'm not quite up on those," Ernest admitted.

"I could give you a hand," said Mirrin. "Write out the recipes, if y'like."

"Much obliged," said Ernest Dawson.

"By Gum, Dad!" said Lily, grinning. "The Talboys will wonder if they've strayed into the Cosmopolitan by mistake if you flash such a menu."

"Wilf's a man who'll appreciate *continentale,*" said Ernest, almost hugging himself at the prospect. "Now, Mirrin, you know our budget; what sort of show can we make?"

"A fair one," said Mirrin, carrying plates from table to sink and fastening on the canvas apron that was her working outfit.

She had just lifted a scouring cloth and reached for the kettle of hot water on the hob when Ernest Dawson said, impatiently, "Leave that: leave it to our Lily. You an' me had better go t'the market, don't ye think? An' see what we'll need t'make a splash. *Poulet à la Marengo* sounds just the ticket."

Mirrin hesitated. "Now?"

"Why not now?" Dawson said, buttoning his cuffs. "Early means cheap."

As Lily passed Mirrin on her way to the sink, she murmured, "You're well in now, Mirrin. He'll be adoptin' you next if this works out well."

"God forbid," Mirrin said, and handed her sister-in-law the apron.

It was later that evening. Spices, cloves of garlic, jugs of salad oil and cask wine and other small purchases that Mirrin had persuaded Dawson to make had been neatly put away on the shelves of the larder. The evening meal, a humble macaroni pie, was being contemplated, when Edward, seated on the table while Mirrin laid out the dishes, said suddenly, "Somebody's upstairs, Auntie Mirrin. D'you hear his loud voice? It might be Father Christmas come early."

Mirrin explained that Father Christmas was too good a timekeeper to arrive a week before Christmas but, pausing, listened to the jovial laughter that echoed down from the front hallway.

Lily hurried into the kitchen, tucking straggles of hair into her pins. "What a commotion. It's the Talboys."

"Just who are the Talboys?" asked Mirrin.

"Friends of my father. Come on up, Mirrin. You come too, Edward, but be a good boy and stay close t'me."

Discarding her apron Mirrin followed Lily upstairs.

The hallway was crammed with people and luggage. Long leather wallets, hatboxes, creased valises and scuffed carpetbags were piled willy-nilly on the waxcloth strip. The door gaped open, showing a haze of frost against the gaslight. Through it, toiling from a railway handcart borrowed from the Manchester line, came Wilfrid Talboys. His womenfolk had already crushed into the hall, three of them, wrapped in jackets and travelling wraps trimmed with various kinds of fur, wearing double skirt dresses and hats in the Rubens or Capote style dolled up with extravagant amounts of trimming. Ernest was helping Talboys unload the cart, the men shouting to each other, Ernest with highly uncharacteristic glee, until the last box had been removed and an urchin paid twopence to trundle the cart back to the station on the other side of town.

Talboys clambered over the wall of luggage. He swung his valise on to the rocking hatstand and, as Ernest edged past him, stretched out his arms and expansively declared, "My dear friends, Ernest, Hilda and Lily, we bid you welcome and a thousand blessings appropriate to the season. It is *so* good to see you again."

Approaching sixty, Wilfrid Talboys had a round red face and bright brown eyes, flourishing gestures and a booming well-modulated voice that seemed to come from the depths of his patent-leather boots. He wore a long overcoat trimmed with astrakhan, and a shiny chimney-pot topper with a wrinkled black satin ribbon. Two of the women were about the same age as Wilfrid. From the strong similarity between them Mirrin took them to be sisters. The younger woman was undoubtedly Talboys' daughter, her features thick, her complexion rubicund. The smile sat stiffly on her lips, however, and Mirrin decided that young Blanche, in her twenties, was either naturally bad-tempered or excessively fatigued by her journey.

Ernest poured out effusive welcomes, adopting the same oratorial style as Talboys until the formalities had all been observed and only Mirrin and Edward, standing back by the newel post of the stairs, remained unaccounted for and, as it were, unblessed by either of the colliding parties.

"Allow me," Talboys cried, twitching his brows. Sweeping off his topper, stepping over the luggage, he made a bow so deep that, for an instant, he was peeping up at Edward instead of down. In that crouched position he paused and, grinning, produced in his left hand a grubby card — which Mirrin took — and a small furled flag. "For you, young nipper."

Tentatively Edward accepted the flag which shook out from its stick into a streamer of coloured pictures of sundry parts of the Empire.

Edward gasped, then chuckled and wagged the flag so wildly that Talboys' topper went skidding to the floor. Everybody, including the victim, laughed uproariously.

Mirrin glanced at the card: *Wilfrid Talboys and the Cropley Sisters: Premier Variety Act: Songs: Choruses: Dances: Dramatic Dialogues: The Family Show Personified.*

Theatricals; she had heard of the profusion of touring troupes in England. In one of the towns she'd passed through with the Brummidges a theatre bill had caught her attention. But Mrs. Brummidge had railed against the immorality of 'the halls', full of loose women and rude men, laughing like jackasses at vulgar jokes and songs.

"Mirrin, Lily, please assist our friends to their rooms."

The Talboys had been allotted the two best 'doubles' on the first floor. Hilda Dawson shepherded the women up the staircase, leaving her daughter, husband and Mirrin to haul up the luggage.

"Dinner at seven o'clock, on the stroke of the gong," called Ernest. "You'll find a little glass of something in your room, though, to fortify you after your railway ordeal, or you may have tea if you prefer it."

"Not for me, Ernest," said Wilfrid Talboys. "Not a moment to lose. Must distribute the handbills." He rummaged, found and lifted a heavy carpetbag. "Two weeks in the Grossby Civic Hall still ain't to be sneezed at. It seems we went down real well last year."

"Not surprised: not in the least surprised," said Ernest from under his load of portmanteaux. "Off you trot then, Wilf, an' do the needful. Let the good folk of the town know what a treat's in store for them."

Wilfrid Talboy opened the outside door. Hunching his shoulders he inhaled the stale cold air of the Midland manufacturing township as if it was a draught of nectar. "Nine years: nine Christmas seasons: and here we are again. It makes you think, don't it, Ernest?"

"How time flies," Ernest agreed. "It does, indeed."

Then, with a faint eager whoop, the carpetbag tucked under his arm, Wilfrid Talboys was gone.

Lily and Mirrin trailed Ernest upstairs, carrying the heavy luggage which, Mirrin assumed, not only contained personal belongings but the costumes and other appurtenances that the Talboys used in their acts. She was glad that Wilfrid wasn't a strongman. To judge by the weight of his trunks, however, perhaps he dabbled in that too.

In the room, Mirrin had an opportunity to study the women more closely. In Wilfrid's presence they seemed overwhelmed, certainly overshadowed by his uproariousness. Ada, Wilf's wife, had been a fine-looking woman in her day. Her eyes were still large and warm, showing great tolerance and humour. There was a quietness in her manner that Mirrin recognised as stoical patience. She wondered what possible events in such a varied and scintillating existence might require patience as an attribute.

"That one belongs to my sister," Ada said. She raised her voice to carry through the open door to the adjoining room. "Pru, luv, your cosmeticals are in here."

"Shall I take it to her?" asked Mirrin.

"Thanks, luv," said Ada, sinking wearily onto the bed and beginning to unlace her boots. "I'm quite wore out what with the early start and the train ride."

"Where did you come from today?"

"Marlingford."

"Where's that?"

"I'm not surprised you never heard of it. On the east coast, a nondescript little place with a theatre about as big as a pigeon-loft, and not much cleaner. Are you Scotch?"

"Aye."

"How did you come here?"

"Lily's my sister-in-law."

Picking at the tight laces with her finger-nails, Ada asked, "Your brother warn't the one that was killed, was he?"

"Aye, he was. My brother James: Lily's husband."

"We don't know we're born, some of us," Ada sighed. "Poor skimpy lassie, a widow at twenty, an' with a kiddie too."

Mirrin lifted the small box of cosmetical preparations and would have gone out then, if she had not been blocked by the abrupt appearance of Wilfrid and Ada's daughter. Blanche flounced into her mother's room already launched on a peevish tirade. "Why is it, mother, that I always land without a mirror? Even the dressing-table's plain. I can't possibly be expected to attend to my coiffeur sharin' Pru's skinkie little hand mirror. You know how long she takes to primp, anyhow."

From the resigned expression on Ada's face, Mirrin guessed that the young woman was prone to such petty outbursts.

"If you like, miss," Mirrin intervened, "I can fetch you a mirror; a large one."

"*You?*" said Blanche.

Mirrin was taken aback.

"Aye: me."

"I shall complain to Mr. Dawson, in person. He shall fetch me a mirror of suitable proportions," Blanche announced. "As the owner of this establishment he should be responsible for the welfare of his guests. The Lord knows, my father shells out enough in lodgin' money."

Mirrin bit her lip. "Very well, miss," she said. "An' will Mr. Dawson also serve your tea?"

"Tea?" said Blanche. "I don't quite take your meaning."

"I thought a cup o'tea might be welcome, as suggested by the owner of this establishment," Mirrin said.

Ada said, "You can bring me tea, please, Mirrin. I take it Mr. Dawson's busy with the dinner."

"That's right, ma'am," said Mirrin. "Very busy."

Blanche was too gauche to appreciate the slight. "Of course, you may bring me tea," she said. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing, Blanche," Ada said gently. Mirrin realised now just why the elder woman had been obliged to learn patience to survive. "A pot of tea would suit us fine, Mirrin."

As she went out of the bedroom to brew tea for Ada Talboys, Mirrin encountered Lily bringing the essential mirror upstairs. Apparently Blanche had raged at her too.

"What d'you think of them, then?" Lily whispered.

"The youngest's a right tartar," said Mirrin. "But I like them fine. It's excitin' havin' theatrical folk on the premises. I've never met any of that trade before. Will we have the chance to attend the theatre an' see them perform?"

"We don't have t'visit the theatre for that," said Lily. "Wilf and Blanche perform all the time, everywhere."

"I can well believe that."

"What's wrong with you?" Lily murmured. "Is it the fever again?"

"Fever? No, I feel fine."

"Must be the excitement," said Lily with a shrug. "Funny how the Talboys affect some folk: my Daddy — an' now you."

"Don't blether," said Mirrin. "It's just the change that I find stimulatin'. In this past year I've grown t'like changes."

Changes there were in plenty during the remainder of that week.

Meals had to be fitted round rehearsals. The long kitchen table was as frequently spread with dresses and costumes for mending and ironing as with pots and pans. The Talboys had the run of the house. Only Mr. Gudgeon, a cantankerous boot salesman on the upper floor, complained about them — and he was due to leave on Christmas Eve in any case.

Playbills, extolling the versatile talents of the troupe, appeared on walls and in shop windows throughout the town. The interest aroused by them reflected the need in the millhands for diverting entertainment, especially at the Christmas season.

For Talboys and his women, Grossby was just one more stop, one more booking, in a professional life that had carried them up and down the north of England, from one provincial theatre to another until each dressing room, every individual fly and curtain was as familiar as the wallpaper in a stay-at-home's living room.

Wilfrid and Ada had a close relationship. Both cherished a high regard for the third member of the act, Pru Cropley, Ada's quiet-spoken, uncomplaining sister. Seasoned veterans of the road, they had tried in vain to instil into the fourth and youngest the sterling qualities of dedication and perseverance. But Blanche, so Pru later confided in Mirrin, had been spoiled as a child, fussed over and flattered until her head had been turned. She had never learned the difference between arrogance and conceit. Now, encountering the harsher realities of the performers' life, Blanche sulked and moaned and vented her bad temper on her aunt and parents without the least regard for their feelings.

"She reminds me a bit of our Betsy," Mirrin said to Lily, as they laid the foundations of the Grand Xmas Dinner.

"She's not near as pretty."

"But just as spoiled. Did you hear her this morning? All that fuss and uproar about a hair-bow. There's somethin' about people like Blanche Talboys, aye, an' our Betsy too, that puts my back up. They consider themselves as the centre o'the world."

"Don't we all?"

"I hope I don't," said Mirrin. "At least, not t'that extent."

"I wouldn't mind bein' spoiled for a while."

"Is that all y'want, Lily? To be made a fuss of."

"In the first year, James spoiled me," the girl said. "I enjoyed it."

"That's a wife's privilege," said Mirrin.

"What would you know about it?"

"I've had my share of . . ." Mirrin bit off the sentence.

"From Rob Ewing?"

"No, not him."

"Tom Armstrong, then?"

"Certainly not the bold Tom Dandy," said Mirrin, laughing. "I meant, when I was wee. Daddy and the boys, James and Dougie, they fussed over me."

"An' who else, since?"

"It would be nice," said Mirrin, changing tack. "Aye, now I think of it, it *would* be nice t'be spoiled. But not for nothin'."

"Mirrin! What do y'mean?"

"Oh, not that!" said Mirrin promptly. "I mean, it would be grand to *earn* respect, to be popular — like the Talboys."

"Nobody cares about them."

"I don't believe that."

"A few strays, maybe: people like my father. But he's known Wilfrid since the days when Ada and Pru worked in the Dunsford Mill an' sang in the Chapel choir on Sundays an' in the gallery o'the *Goose and Gander* every other night of the week."

"Is that how they met?"

"So I've heard."

The conversation was interrupted by Hilda Dawson who sharply advised the girls to concentrate on their work and do a little less gossiping.

Christmas, thanks to Mirrin's influence on Ernest, was to be celebrated in style after all. The theatricals were overjoyed.

"I can't remember when we last had a real sit-down Christmas dinner. It must be ten . . . no, fifteen . . . nearer twenty years. When Blanche was a baby." Pru gave up her attempt to count the passage of the years and bestowed on everyone a happy, trembling smile. Wilf bellowed with laughter and insisted that she put on her bonnet and jacket and toddle out to help Edward and himself select a Christmas tree, the first that had ever decorated the Dawson household.

"With a star on top," said Lily, almost in a whisper, the memory of another tree, in another town, rising into her mind.

With the Talboys' show due to open on Boxing Day and the unfortunate necessity of conducting a full dress rehearsal on the evening of Christmas Day, it was decided that, tradition notwithstanding, dinner would be a mid-day affair. Only Blanche, by her manner, seemed to indicate that the arrangements did not suit her, though she gave no reasons for her disapproval and offered no alternative suggestions.

By dusk on Christmas Eve, it seemed to Mirrin that she had been on her feet for a week. Returning with the tree, Talboys had also contributed great bunches of shiny red-berried holly which had been set to sprout behind the pictures and under the gas brackets in the public rooms and stairs. He, Ernest and Edward, like three children, decorated the tree and planted it in a pot in the dining room.

All day there had been a coming and going of guests, swift, excited arrivals from last minute bits of business and equally swift departures for trains and coaches to outlying towns and villages where the solitaries who lodged with Dawson sought, after all their complaints, hospitality with friends, relatives and generous acquaintances. Mr. Quayle remained, resolutely determined to enjoy dinner *en famille*. Mrs. Perkin and her daughter Sue, the musical instrument dealers, could, in the end, find nowhere to go on that day of days and, with resignation, donated two bottles of wine to the proceedings they would be forced to enjoy, plus the gift of an elabotate and noisy 'one-man band' for Edward.

By seven o'clock the fowls and the rabbit had been united in an uneasy alliance in the tenderiser, the pieces garnished with garlic, cayenne, a liberality of wine and some other herbs which Mirrin supposed would do no harm to the flavour. The ingredients of the sauce were laid out in bowls under cheesecloth and the mushrooms, bought only that morning, were steeping in one measured inch of sherry. The tipsy cake was settling in its huge cut-glass dish, ready only to be roofed with cream. The soup stock, labelled as *Prince of Wales's Delight* and consisting largely of turnips, stood passively in its black cauldron on the cool of the stove. Pies, tarts and sweetmeats, baked by Mirrin and Lily and aided by Ernest's 'advice', were stacked away in the larder's mouseproof shelves, though Wilfrid Talboys was heard to ask pointedly if the larder was 'guest-proof' as well. Plates and dishes, table-cloths and glasses were brought from hiding, scrutinised by Hilda's scrupulous eye, approved, washed, dried, buffed and laid out in the dining room upstairs. At last cleaning began: general parlour, stairs and hall for a start. Like an army weaponed with buckets and brooms the women went to work. The 'worst rough' had been done inch by nch and tile by tile during the preceding week but that final 'rede-round' took the best part of the evening, before kitchen chores again called to the girls.

Propped against the table, rolling out breadcrumbs, Mirrin followed Lily's pointing finger. Set to polish apples for the dish on he sideboard, Edward had nodded off and, cloth still in hand, slept with his nose resting on his wrist, one large pippin still in his grasp.

"I know how he feels," said Mirrin. "I'm about ready to drop myself."

Lily coaxed the sleeping child into her arms. Mirrin held the kitchen door open. "Supper shouldn't be long an' then we can all go to bed," Lily said. "I think everybody's tired."

Everbody, it transpired, but Blanche.

Since the arrival of the Talboys' menage, a light supper had been dispensed, with some little formality, in the Dawsons' private parlour, during the course of which Hilda and Ada reminisced about old times, and Ernest extracted as much 'green-room gossip' as Wilfrid was able to invent. It was not usual for Mirrin and Lily to be invited to join the parlour group, but, on that evening, because of the season and the impression that Mirrin had lately begun to make on Ernest Dawson, the young women were graciously permitted to stay.

Wilf had spent the morning with the leasing agent of the Civic Hall and had returned well pleased with the early returns on bookable seats to announce that all the 'reserveds' had gone for Boxing Day, both houses, and for Saturday as well. He beamed round the parlour, and patted his wife's knee.

"Tomorrow we must rehearse as never before," he said. "All that new material has to be shined up, you know."

"It's not bad as it is, Wilf," Ada remarked.

"Not bad isn't good enough," said Wilf, amiably. "I've laid on the orchestra for six o'clock, splittin' the cost with the manager, Mr. Ockram, and . . ."

"No."

Blanche's normally rubicund cheeks were ashen. Her eyes glared defiance. "I will *not* rehearse on Christmas Day. I see no reason why we should rehearse at all. We're quite proficient enough for the ignorant audience we're liable to attract in this dismal backwater."

With a quick, startled glance round the assembly, Wilf said, "Come now, my dear, that isn't polite to our hosts. Besides, Grossby has always been good to us, and we must reward them with our very best efforts."

"Most of the songs and dances I can do in my sleep."

"Oh, nonsense, Blanche!" said Ada. "What about that delightful new ditty your father had specially commissioned for you. It has never been performed before the public."

"Delightful! It's tuneless and silly, and set too high for me. Commissioned, indeed! Father bought it for a shilling from a drunken sot in a public house in Sutton last year and hasn't had the temerity to foist it on the public before."

"Now, now, Blanche," chided Pru, mildly.

"Don't *you* talk to me. You're just hoping I'll crack on the top notes and make a fool of myself, so *your* stupid solo will sound better."

Pru's injured gasp was followed by an embarrassed shuffling of feet and a sudden urgent rush on the part of Hilda and Ernest Dawson to press tea and arrowroot biscuits on everyone.

Ada, however, was used to dealing with such crises. Drawing herself up, she fixed her daughter and said, "You are tired, Blanche. I suggest you retire at once to bed. You'll feel better in the morning, and then you may apologise to Pru."

"I will not feel better in the morning."

"Christmas Day, dearest," put in Wilfrid.

"And I have no intention of apologising to *her*."

"Blanche, Blanche!" Wilf murmured, sorrowfully.

"I will, however, retire to my bedroom. I will thank you all not to make too much noise."

Blanche made a theatrical exit, sweeping out like some haughty princess who has just spurned the proposal of a prince because she didn't like the colour of his stockings.

"Ahem: ahem!" Hilda, it seemed, had developed a cough. Solicitously, Lily hurried to pour her mother a fresh cup of tea, while Mirrin made another hospitable round with the arrowroot biscuits.

Ada sighed, "Blanche hasn't got over what happened in Marlington, I'm afraid. It upset her deeply."

There was a pause. Nobody seemed anxious to press for details, though Ada's statement invited them.

At length Pru said, "Blanche's vocal performance was rather coolly received in Marlingford."

Wilf made a soft roaring sound in the back of his throat and, with a gesture of indifference to such niceties of expression, seated himself on the sofa and, with the tea cup in his hand, said bluntly, "The truth is Blanche was howled off the stage. Admittedly, the audience were, in part, a shade worse for drink, though they took to the rest of us warmly enough."

Mirrin said, "Why not to Blanche, then?"

"She resents them," Wilf explained. "They sense it, you know. You've got to love your audience, even when they're givin' you the gooseberry. You've got to put out to them and ignore what comes back."

"Tell the whole truth, now you've started," said Ada. "We're all friends here."

Wilf sighed heavily. "Blanche deserved it. She was unrehearsed an' careless. Two false starts to the song, then she forgot the words. Can you credit it, a daughter of mine, forgettin' the words!"

"That was quite bad enough, but . . ." said Ada, then handed the narration back to her husband, like the good trouper she was.

"One lout threw a pear. It didn't touch Blanche, mark you, but it skidded across the stage, and . . . and . . ."

"At times," said Ada, "Blanche behaves quite . . ."

"Irrationally," said Pru, curtly. She got to her feet. "I for one don't feel like discussin' Blanche's failings at this hour on Christmas Eve. If you'll excuse me, all."

Smiling politely, the woman turned and left the parlour and, shortly thereafter, the supper party disbanded in unusual gloom.

Later, in bed, Lily turned her head on the pillow and through half-closed lids inspected her sister-in-law. Mirrin's eyes were wide open, fixed on the ceiling, a smile on her lips.

"What's the matter with you, Mirrin? I thought you were dyin' with sleep an hour ago?"

Mirrin's smile widened. "I am," she said. "But I was thinkin' about Blanche Talboys and her encounter with that pear. D'you know what I'd have done, I'd have thrown it right back at the ruffian."

"Would you?" said Lily. "That's just what Miss Talboys *did*. An' she hit him too, right on the bokoo."

Mirrin lifted herself on her elbow.

"You don't mean it?"

"I had it from Ada," said Lily. "Mushed the lout right on the bokoo, I'm tellin' you. There was such a riot the manager had to drop the curtain and the Talboys had to run for it."

"Fancy!" said Mirrin.

Lily laughed drowsily. "Right on the bokoo. She must throw better'n she sings."

Chuckling, Mirrin lay back, hands behind her head.

"Well, I wouldn't run," Mirrin said at length. "I'd square up to them, that's what I'd do. I'd love my audience, like Mr. Talboys says. Lily, d'you think . . . ?"

But Lily had fallen asleep.

Snow lay on the rolling hills of Perthshire and, in waving sunlight, gleamed on the higher mountains to the west. It was that hour before sunset when the McAlmonds' young guests had come in from their riding and the women had gone upstairs to prepare for dinner, to dress themselves like pheasants in trimmings of lace and velvet. The library windows of Pearsehill Castle looked north-east across the valley of the Froud, a broad winding river noted for its salmon pools and its picturesque highland beauty. The air now was clear and very cold. Pine logs blazing in the arched stone hearth were a welcome sight to Fraser and Drew who, though young, had thinned their blood a bit of late with indiscriminate feeding and an excess of ale. Hector Mellish had enough style not to follow fashion if it didn't suit him. He had spent the afternoon sprawled in a deep moquette sofa whose back and sides were tied together with hawsers of silk. Hector was drinking Madeira wine, nibbling brazils and laconically conversing with Sir Archibald McAlmond.

McAlmond Pater stood with his back to the fire. He was dressed in casual tweeds so thick that — as Fraser remarked —

he resembled a ferret peering out of a sack. Sir Archibald's features were weak, but not febrile, his bearing shaped by practising upright postures and emulating the autocratic down-the-snoot stare of his wife's ancestors all of whom surveyed the mansion from heavy gilt frames, their portraits crowding hallways, stairs and the walls of all public rooms like permanently materialised phantoms, reminding the good gentleman that he was not *quite* the true blueblood that he pretended to be.

Dinner the previous evening had been small and comparatively informal. Drew had said very little, answering only such questions as were addressed to him, mainly by Lady Isobel, a personage whose warmth was strained and whose innate shyness, had Drew only known it, almost matched his own. Lady Isobel McAlmond, of the Oakley stock, fished for information about her son. She was probably anxious in case Fraser had taken up with low company and that his guest, Drew Stalker, was an emissary of that underworld of artisans whose influence would eventually bring down not only Fraser but, in time to come, the whole feudal establishment of a class-structured society.

At first Fraser's mother, an imposingly handsome woman, threw Drew into a state of almost dumbfounded awe. The young man acquitted himself well enough, however, parrying her questions with lies and neat evasions about the habits of students living in Edinburgh, discoursing, when pressed, about the fascination of Law in such a way that Fraser too was incorporated into the conversation and seemed to shine more brilliantly than his humble companion. By the meal's end, the dear lady was impressed, less by her guest than by her son's serious attitude to his profession.

But that had been yesterday. This evening, Drew knew, the sundry guests who had been skidding in all day long for the formal dinner and Christmas entertainment would show up his origins, typified by his cheap new suit and unpolished manners. He would be more obviously what he really was, a bit of an upstart who had fallen under Fraser's spell and whom the McAlmond lad had cultivated as a curiosity. Still, he had done well to reach this point in so short a time and the Pearsehill vacation was a valuable introduction to the world he eventually hoped to conquer.

Though Drew was unaware of it, Sir Archibald was not so diffident as he appeared to be. Prior to the couple's arrival, he had been pumping Mellish about the young fellow with whom his son seemed so taken up. Hector had developed enough respect for Stalker over the past month to manfully support the youngster and sing his virtues. It was in that pre-prandial hour in the library, before Sir Archibald's more important guests demanded all his attention, that the head of the Perthshire McAlmonds and the collier's son met with a view to establishing a fuller knowledge each of the other.

Sir Archibald poured Drew a glass of wine and offered him a cigar, which he refused. Drew was still awkward in his movements, his confidence all vocal. In this special particular he differed completely from Sir Archibald who had learned grace early in his life but had never mastered the art of quick thinking and articulate phrasing so that his conversations, casual and serious alike, had a limping quality as if the legs of his sentences were bowed and stunted.

In the ten minutes it took the winter sun to sink over the hills and the lamps in the library to gain yellow strength, the young man and the laird succeeded in establishing a relationship which would carry Drew through the stiff rituals of a grand-scale dinner party without blowing the gaff on his background. He gained Sir Archibald's respect not by flattery, not by agreeing with the half-baked opinions which the gentleman put out to probe the boy's worth. He did it by firmly sticking up for his own beliefs and by defending them with calm logic. It seemed like honesty, an impromptu acknowledgment of their relative positions, sophisticated to a degree far beyond his years.

After some preliminary introduction, Sir Archibald said, "You will, of course, be in favour of trade unionism?"

Drew said, "In its present form, certainly."

Sir Archibald stuck his tongue in his cheek. "You support the present wave of reforms?"

The blanketing of all reforms suited Drew. He said, "I support those which allow men opportunity."

"Opportunity for . . . what?" said Sir Archibald.

"Advancement."

"Strikes and pickets?"

"Is it your belief, Sir Archibald, that preliminary reform will bring equality?"

"That is the avowed aim of certain factions in our . . . midst."

"No, sir," said Drew. "It's not possible to accept the bounty of ie government, legislatively, and remain true to original causes. have seen rabble-rousers, listened to strike leaders. There's little r no sense in what they say. I would let them have all that a Tory emocracy promises. The party system is catchpenny, the working lasses easily swayed by minor circumstances. The Licensing Act, or instance, lost more Liberal supporters than the Ballot or the rtisans' Dwelling Act ever gained."

Drew paused. He was treading carefully. His own knowledge f political subjects was makeshift, mostly learned by rote, with nderstanding but no conviction. He was counting on Daniel Iorn's assurance that McAlmond did not keep himself abreast of uch complicated affairs.

Sir Archibald hummed for a moment then, reluctantly, admitted hat he did not quite follow the argument.

Drew said, "The distinction made between skilled and unskilled vorkers in the trades creates yet another division in our society, ir."

This thought had obviously not occurred to the laird, or if it ad he had not understood its implications. He nodded, inviting)rew to expand.

"The skilled labourer, threatened with extinction by industrial nachinery, wishes to obtain power to protect his special station. 'he Conservatives have backed him. The Liberals, Gladstone, pparently made men free to help themselves. In effect, however, he working classes do not wish to be free. They are, sir, I assure ou, slaves at heart. Divisionism within their ranks will create an xpansion of the middle class, a proper respect for power in the allot box and aspirations towards the stabilisation of society as it s now. For example, the majority do not appreciate that by egalising 'peaceful picketing' at strikes the parliamentary government has cheated them of the right to show their discontent by ggressive behaviour. The government has ensured that workers' eaders, the skilled and the educated among them, will file meekly o a committee room where compromises can be reached, compromises designed to ensure greater output at minimal outlay to he owners or manufacturers."

Drew was rapidly reaching the limits of his knowledge of political science. He had prepared his brief from editorials in the Radical Press, sugared with negative summations culled from established journals.

Sir Archibald seemed anxious to press for more information but he could not, in the face of such an erudite onslaught, find a means to phrase his question.

Mellish came to his rescue. "Tell me, Drew, do you regard this as a deliberate plot of Westminster?"

"Of course not, Hector. Altruism has always been the snare to catch the unwary, whether Whig or Tory. It arises from a gross misunderstanding of the lower classes," Drew replied.

McAlmond Pater understood that pointed statement well enough. He grunted an approval, and cocked his eyebrow at his son as if to applaud Fraser's selection of friends.

Drew said, "The majority of reforms are not radical but humanitarian. Certainly tyrannical and stupid masters will suffer. But in the end most social reforms will benefit trade, and healthy trade means healthy profits. The welfare and fitness of the labouring classes is essential to progress."

The contradiction puzzled Sir Archibald. "But . . . ?"

Drew said, "Confine resentment, where it exists, channel it into internecine struggles." He had borrowed that entire phrase intact from Peter French's inflammatory tract and had merely shifted the emphasis. "And you will find that the gentlemen of this country no longer have to soil their hands or waste their valuable time on suppressing riots and unruly mobs."

"Very clever, Stalker," Fraser said, almost as if he was congratulating Drew for having so arranged the social geology. "You see, father, we are in no danger of being beseiged by the tenants and stormed like the Bastille, as Mama fears."

"I doubt, Sir Archibald," said Drew, "that *you* will ever have anything but the loyalty of your workers."

"I have always avoided coalmines," said Sir Archibald, apropos of nothing except a strange apprehension that by tampering with that dismal trade he would become a target for radical wrath and be smoked out of his comfortable ignorance.

Mellish said, "Will you become a leader of men, Stalker, old fellow? Will you put your degree to the service of your class?"

"I will put my degree to the service of the Law, Hector," said

Drew with a hint of reprimand. "The Law is not a dray-horse to be packed with ideals and driven down a main street like a bread cart dispensing charity. I will be — hope to be — a servant of justice. No more, no less."

"I'm sure you will be, Stalker," said Sir Archibald. "A brave speech, and . . . and . . ."

"Admirable sentiments," Fraser added.

Sir Archibald nodded and, as the clock struck five, said, "Come, we must dress for dinner. I hope we'll have an opportunity to talk again, Andrew. If not on this visit, on your next."

As the three young men followed the laird out of the library, Fraser patted Drew on the shoulder and said, "It seems that father likes you."

"How could he fail to?" said Hector drily. But Drew, at that moment, was too pleased with himself to detect a warning in Mellish's tone.

Ten

IN THE DAWSON household, that Christmas morning, breakfast was a scrappy affair. Everyone was preoccupied with final preparations for one o'clock dinner. Delicious smells issuing from the kitchen, however, kept the guests warm with anticipation of good things to come later in the day. Father Christmas had, of course, called on Edward. The boy's wonder at the magical advent of the whiskered philanthropist from the North Pole had given way to wild excitement, an energy which manifest itself in a non-stop careering up and down stairs, in and out of all the rooms, his head enveloped in a cocked hat, legs clasped over a brightly painted hobby-horse and a fiendishly shrill trumpet clenched in his teeth. The young hussar realised that as amnesty had been declared on noise, he could kick up as much din as he wished without fear of reprimand. More presents were piled under the tree in the dining room including the small items that Mirrin had been able to afford; lavender bags for the women, watch gloves for the men, though she had stretched to a muffler for Lily and a large box of paints for her nephew.

Blanche Talboy's disposition had not been improved by her night's sleep or by the significance of the day. Even Mirrin had felt the sharp edge of the young theatrical's tongue in lieu of a seasonal greeting. As on the previous evening, the thorn in Blanche's side was her father's insistence that they should rehearse. It was part of Wilf's perfectionism, a penalty for the fact that he preferred to present a family show intact rather than seek a booking in one of the newer halls and submerge his act in a whole variety bill. Wilf, Ada confided to Mirrin, could no longer abide to have his songs, dances and monologues topped by ladies sporting with crocodiles, prancing puppies, somnambulists, dancing Zulus, wire-walkers and fat girls who allowed themselves to be shot from cannons. It was all very well to subordinate one's talents to such curious freaks in a really grand house like the Crystal Palace or the Argyll, but the provincial theatre's strength lay in the versatility of its troupers or, as Wilf put it, in the multi-faceted skills of its terpsichoreans and warblers. That was what the humble folk of Grossby wanted and, by Gad, that was what they were a-goin' to get for their money.

"I'm not going near that place today," Blanche shouted.

"I say you are, Blanche."

"We are as good as we need be for Grossby."

"Put your shoulder to the wheel, Blanche, please."

"For what? To be pelted with over-ripe fruit again."

"It's Christmas, luv."

"I *know* it's Christmas."

"Blanche, dearest, please."

"*Leave me alone.*"

The fact that Blanche was skulking in her room was enough to cast a faint gloom over the other occupants of the house. But some time in mid-morning when snow began to sift out of the leaden sky and the Salvationists' Band could be heard playing carols softly and sweetly over in the town square, the joyful expectancy of Christmas gradually reasserted itself, and the bustle of eager activity increased.

Fires were lit in all the rooms, plates set to warm on the stove racks, the glass gauge on the stove peered at constantly as if it was an oracle which augered the future. Ernest Dawson made punch to his own frugal recipe. Hilda painstakingly sliced up *glacé* cherries to ornament cakes. Wilf, Ada and Pru, listing a little without the fourth member of their quartet, attended church, then went on to the Civic Hall for a half hour to practise extra verses, written for the occasion by Wilfrid Talboys in person, of 'Slap, Bang, Here We Are Again'. They were back in a couple of hours and it seemed, to Mirrin, that they had hardly been gone at all.

"All that fuss," she remarked to Lily. "Blanche could have been with them easy enough."

"It goes deeper than idleness, I think," said Lily. "It's worse than I've ever seen it between them four."

"It's all that spoiled cow's fault," said Mirrin.

"I'm not so sure," Lily said. "Well, at least she'll be down for her dinner. Blanche isn't one to miss a treat just to prove her point."

"I hope she doesn't make it miserable for everybody else," said Mirrin.

"We won't let her," Lily said.

All further conversation was obliterated by the advent of Edward leading a charge through the kitchen out into the echoing laundry rooms and on still, like Napoleon, into the wild white wastes of the yard where a quarter inch of fluffy snow already quilted the cobbles.

Blanche did not have to be persuaded to appear promptly for dinner, summoned, as were all the guests, by a prolonged call on Edward's trumpet which, so loud and enthusiastic was it, might have brought in the hungry from the neighbouring county. They were all saluted by Edward as they entered the dining room and all solemnly presented with cardboard chapeaux which everyone, even Blanche, donned before they found their allotted places at the dining-room table. The Talboys and Pru, Mr. Quayle, Mrs. Perkins and her daughter Sue; Ernest had the top and Hilda the bottom, Edward cushioned up by his grandma's side, while Mirrin and Lily took places nearest the door to pop conveniently in and out of the servery.

The dinner was a huge success, the *Poulet à la Marengo* declared superior to greasy old goose or stringy turkey any day of the week, the Tipsy Cake Trifle, in huge quantities, slipping down better than stodgy plum pudding. There was a tiny plum pudding too, of course, as a sop to tradition, and mince pies and iced cakes with cherries and punch and wine and, courtesy of Mr. Quayle, a quart bottle of fiery liquid which the label touted as Best French Brandy without actually incriminating the importer by name.

By three o'clock the dinner was over. Mellowed by it all, the guests napped for fifteen or twenty minutes in sundry casual positions in the parlour before games and singing got underway, led by Wilf and Ernest. For this one afternoon Ernest came into his own as a comic songster, a star lost to the halls by circumstances.

in a topper of spangled cardboard, a monocle glued to his eye, Ernest Dawson put dignity aside and rendered a medley of the popular London songs of the day, half the Leybourne repertoire from 'Champagne Charlie' through to 'Zazel, Zazel', without once wavering in the verses or straying from the tune. Much to everybody's surprise he was beautifully accompanied by Sue Perkins and her mother on ocarinas produced from their reticules which, as Wilf quipped, were not quite deep enough to hide a brace of euphoniums, thank the Lord.

Even to Lily it was a revelation of her parents' interest in the vulgar glamour of the theatre, as the couple, Hilda included, crooned and trilled through choruses of songs long forgotten by all but veteran troupers, echoes of the days of the Midlands 'free-and-easies' and Yorkshire stingos, a whole chapter of their youth which had been closed and locked away beneath respectability.

Even Mr. Quayle burst into song during a lull in the proceedings and cutlassed his way to the heart of 'The Chickaleary Cove' before he had to be flanked and supported by Wilf and Ada and carried, dazed but courageous, to the end where a medicinal glass of French waited to cure his wheeze.

Blanche would not deign to accept a polite invitation to render Dark Girl in Blue'. But Mirrin, in a clear perfectly-pitched voice, sang 'Lochinvar' so movingly that even Ernest shed a tear and all the ladies present had to be revived with punch and ginger candy.

It was at that moment, though Mirrin had no means of knowing it, that her career in the theatre began.

On Boxing Day after an early lunch — plain fare again — Ada, Wilf and Pru left for the Civic Hall. The lethargy which prevailed in the Dawson's house was not confined to the girls, who had been up late the previous night washing dishes and generally clearing up. Mr. Quayle slept through breakfast. Mrs. Perkins and her daughter went off to Leeds to attend a concert and Wilf kept an anxious eye on the weather which was cold and still. Even Edward, who had been allowed to stay up long past his usual bedtime, was content to amuse himself quietly with his paints and modelling clay and the other gifts that had been found for him under the Christmas tree before supper the day before.

Mirrin sustained a feeling of contentment only faintly tinged with the nostalgia that was an essential part of Christmas. It had been a good Christmas, the best she could remember for years. But there had hardly been a minute of it, while she was involved with her new friends, that she'd forgotten the old. There had been a letter from Kate and another from Mam, thanking her for the money she'd sent them and expressing their delight that she had met up with Lily once more. Betsy had recorded her greetings on a scented card and, of the family, only Drew had failed to make a seasonal gesture of affection and friendship — not that Mirrin cared. She thought of them all, of Houston too, and Tom and even of Rob Ewing as she napped in the wooden kitchen chair after the mid-day meal on Boxing Day. But, as her sleep deepened, she was abruptly tormented by images of the witch-like Mag shouting 'Plugs as big as yor fist. Cut 'em out. Cut 'em out', and then of Colly riding on a turnip cart, the turnips falling, pouring down on her. She struggled and moaned but the weight of the vegetables seemed to crush her.

"Mirrin! Mirrin! For pity's sake, wake up."

Blinking, Mirrin was relieved to be dragged out of her troubled slumber and to look up into Lily's startled face.

"I . . . I was dreaming," she said. "Comes of too much plum duff, I suppose."

"Aye, it's affected more than you," said Lily, urgently. "Blanche is still in her room."

"I thought she'd gone t'rehearsals with the others."

"She was supposed t'follow on in an hour," said Lily. "But she's locked herself in and I can't get a sensible word out of her."

"Let her stew."

"There's a lad here from the Hall sayin' that her father wants her round there right away."

"For rehearsals?" said Mirrin. "What time is it?"

"After three."

Mirrin pushed herself up. "We'd better howk her out of there. To my mind, her Da's had about all he'll take."

On the upstairs landing they encountered Hilda Dawson, flushed and fierce, picking over keys on a circular wire.

"Most of these haven't been used for years," said Hilda. "Lily, try this one. If that . . . that . . . girl hasn't left the key in the lock or pushed the bolt then we'll find one to open the door eventually."

Stooping Lily peered through the keyhole. "I can see through, mother," she said.

"What's she doing?"

"She's . . . she's in bed."

"Is she ill? What could it be? Not typhus? Oh God, not . . ."

"Calm yourself, Mrs. Dawson," said Mirrin. "Now, if you go downstairs and make a cup of tea, I think Lily an' me can effect an entry an' waken young Miss Blanche."

"She *must* be ill."

"I don't think so, mother," said Lily, firmly. "Now, please, make some tea."

By the time Hilda Dawson had reached the ground floor corridor and bustled out of earshot, Lily had fitted the correct key into the lock and had pushed into Blanche's room.

It was immediately apparent that a stronger draught than tea would be required to put Blanche on her feet and restore her [redacted]

Speechless, Mirrin gaped down at the dishevelled figure sprawled across the patchwork conterpane. The young woman's cheeks were scarlet, her mouth gaped and she breathed stentorously over a posy of withered violets in her hands. Tied with silver thread, the nosegay was pressed against her bosom, the blooms as brown and weightless now as gull's feathers. Also on the bed was a sepia photograph in a stiff grey cardboard frame. It showed Blanche in a white dress and huge summery hat leaning against an iron railing beyond which was the sea. She was laughing up into the face of a lumpy young man dressed in a coarse herringbone suit, a soft felt hat stuck raffishly on his head.

Mirrin understood at once. She also understood that the gin bottle on the floor, which had probably begun the day as full, was now empty.

"She's . . . she's *blotto*!" Mirrin exclaimed.

"Thank Heavens my Da's gone out to the market," said Lily. "Listen, we've first got to fetch her out of her stupor, Mirrin. We've got to get her to the Hall."

"Wring out a washcloth in cold water, an' I'll sit her up," said Mirrin. Slipping an arm under the girl's shoulder she endeavoured to hoist her from the counterpane. "Hup y'come, Blanche."

Blanche flapped weakly at the intruder and went completely dead-weight so that Mirrin could do no more than hoist the girl's head from the pillow. Lily returned with a sopping cloth from the ewer on the dresser and plastered it against Blanche's flushed cheeks. The girl blubbered and shook her head but did not rise or show much sign that her nervous system was responding to the deluge. Mouth against Blanche's ear, Lily snapped, "You're wanted at the theatre, Blanche. Blanche, d'you hear me? Open your eyes."

"She's guzzled the whole flamin' bottle," said Mirrin. "She won't come round this side of tomorrow."

Hilda Dawson entered the bedroom bearing a tray of tea things.

Forestalling her mother's enquiries and outraged responses, Lily said, "She's been drinkin', Mam, an' she's absolutely pie-eyed."

"But . . ."

"I know; she's wanted at the theatre."

"Civic Hall," Hilda corrected, automatically. She put down the tray on the dresser, poured herself a cup of tea and drank it, while Mirrin and Lily shook and cajoled the prostrate girl, all to no effect.

Hilda said, "The lad's still downstairs, the lad from the Hall. What'll we tell Wilf?"

Mirrin said, "I'll tell him, shall I?"

Hilda said, "Tell him his daughter's drunk?"

Mirrin said, "No, I'll tell him she's . . . unwell."

Hilda said, "I certainly didn't expect *this* sort of behaviour from our friends' daughter, I assure you. An' we were *so* lookin' forward to seein' the show tonight, Ernest and I."

Lily said, "If we work on her, Mam, maybe she'll come round in time."

Hilda sniffed. "Out of that stupor? In less than four hours?"

Lily shook her head disconsolately. "You're right, Mam."

Hilda said, "Wilf and the ladies will just have to improvise, that's all."

"So, I'll tell him the truth?"

"Best do that, Mirrin."

The front awning of painted wood was ornamented with a gaudy paper streamer which announced that the *Grand Family Show* would begin at eight that evening. Other bills pasted to boards flanking the doors touted the *Family Act Supreme: Totally Eclipsing All Similar Concert Parties.* They seemed highly inappropriate considering that the youngest member of the Talboys' troupe was, at that moment, giving a fine performance of drunken stupor.

The snow had stopped. On the main thoroughfare it had churned into a brown soup under the wheels of traffic which seemed to have converged from all over the county on that Boxing Day afternoon. Mirrin knew, of course, that the Civic Hall was not the primary attraction in Grossby, that most of the traffic had to do with seasonal visitation and the dozen or so taverns and public houses that thrived in the streets of the mill town. Even so, it was not difficult to imagine the chagrin of the crowd in the packed hall when the Grand Family Act turned out to be a trio, not even a quartet.

The prop boy led Mirrin down an alley and opened a side door, impolitely preceding her into an almost pitch dark corridor which smelled of beer and cats. She was led on now less by the boy than by the sound of a piano repetitiously hammering out a phrase from 'Slap, Bang', and by Ada's faded voice endeavouring to fit lyrics to it. The smell of cats gave way to the earthy odour of limewash and paint, sharpened by turpentine. The four 'flats' that the Talboys used as backdrops were hung like drying sheets across the rear of the Civic's stage, roped to pulleys which in turn were guyed to the crankshaft of a device that looked like a mangle. The gloom was alleviated by a filter of light from under the flats. The racket of the piano and voice became very loud indeed, amplified by the deep box-like construction of the stage.

The Civic Hall, Mirrin had been informed, was used for all sorts of events, from Flower and Vegetable Shows and Cotton Workers' Meetings through to Choral Society Concerts and the inevitable cycle of Educational Lectures and Lantern Slides, covering every subject under the sun. Bills, all wrinkled and scrawled, still decorated the outer corridors touting for performances long since over and forgotten.

The boy led Mirrin round a threadbare curtain to the side of the narrow stage. She peered out across the empty benches, up to the curve of the gallery and the 'gods', then her eye travelled wonderingly round the crouch of the tiers back to the island of gaslight left of centre in which Wilf Talboys and his women stood like castaways.

Boots clumping, the prop boy, who was the son of a Borough employee and slept on the premises, stalked across the stage and held out his hand. He might have been offering himself for the part of Oliver Twist, though he was much less timid than Dickens' urchin as he cupped both palms as if in expectation of a shower of coins.

"Where is she?" Talboys asked.

"Ain't come. Sent 'er friend."

Wilf peered past his sister-in-law, who was standing in front of an open Castilioni pianoforte, and called out, "Is that you, Hilda?"

"It's Mirrin Stalker, Mr. Talboys."

"Time's money, Wilf," the youngster said.

Wilf fished in his vest pocket and produced a single coin which he dropped absently into the small grubby hands which closed on it with a derisively triumphant gesture, as if extracting copper from a theatrical was a great feat indeed. The boy, known as Ling for short, tramped back past Mirrin and vanished behind the wing curtain, leaving the scornful phrase, "Trouble now, Wilfrid, ol' cove" hanging in the air like fake ectoplasm.

"Where is she, then?" boomed from the 'gods'.

"I don't know yet, do I?" Wilf retorted, pitching his voice to reach through the musty darkness to the lone spectator in the centre of the uppermost tier of seats.

"You conned me into acceptin' the four of you, 'stead of a full bill. Now you got down to three. I'll 'ave a solo artiste 'stead of a variety hackt on me hands 'fore the week's up."

Mirrin could just make out the tall figure in the 'gods' leaning on the iron rail which kept the rowdies from flinging themselves into the stalls under the influence of alcohol, enthusiasm or violent disapproval.

"Booked you for four," the manager shouted. "I ain't seen the filly but once since you got 'ere, Talboys, an', by Gum, even that treat were hardly worth the waitin' for."

With an extravagant gesture of dismissal, Wilf advanced on Mirrin, murmuring, "Where is Blanche?"

"She's . . . she's . . . unwell."

"What's wrong wi' her?" asked Ada.

"She seemed well enough this mornin'," said Pru.

"She's . . ." Mirrin began.

Wilf put his hand on her shoulder and steered her back into the folds of the curtain. It might have been a performance now of *Murder by Night*.

"Is she incapacitated by liquor?" asked Wilf.

"Aye."

"Damn the girl: damn her!" He stared into Mirrin's eyes like a mesmerist. "Can we bring her round enough to do the third act, d'you think?"

"I doubt it," said Mirrin. "I'm sorry, Mr. Talboys."

"Not your fault, luv," said Ada, who had come up on them now. "She's been mooning for the last three months."

"It's that rascal in Hatherton, that's who . . ."

"Hush, now, Wilf," said Ada. "How much has she imbibed?"

"One full bottle, I think: gin."

Ada nodded. "Like the night in Bradford."

"But that wasn't just *us*: we were only a spot on the bill then, could fill in," said Wilf. "He'll hang me. Ockram will hang me. And I wouldn't blame him."

"Ockram'll hang you sure as eggs," said Ockram who, having descended on silent wings from the gallery, appeared now from the steps at the top of the orchestra trough.

Later Mirrin learned that Ockram was the representative of a Leeds-based agent whose profession was the outlaying of the deposit necessary to secure a lease of halls and small theatres all across the North and Midlands, and the booking of a conglomeration of acts and performers to fill those engagements for the public's delight and his own profit. Ockram's master seldom lost out on the transaction. A printed iron-clad contract made the artistes responsible for loss of revenue and insured him against having to dip into his own pocket in the event of a flop. In exchange for his capital investment, the agent, Mr. Harrison Colcutt, cleared all his expenses and sliced off fifty per cent of the box-office haul, leaving the residue to be divided among the performers. It suited Ockram, and Colcutt, to book a single act into the small-capacity hall in Grossby. The Talboys had proved popular enough in the past to warrant the minimal risk of a riot and a subsequent boycott by the good folk of the little cotton town.

At the time, however, Mirrin had no knowledge of such financial machinations. Her pity was directed towards Wilf, Ada and Pru to whom Ockram's acid comments seemed to mean so much.

Ockram was younger than his world-weary voice suggested. Very tall and gaunt with blond hair, almost white-blond brows and eyes the colour of dried roseleaves; he wore a well-cut, expensive dress coat and a white cambric tie, which gave him the look of a clergyman. A life-long dislike of towering above his fellows, or the need to accommodate his height to incompatible surroundings, had given him a permanent stoop, like a joiner's ruler about to fold into pocket dimensions.

"What's 'appened, Talboys? Where's the filly, then? I thought you sent Ling along for her?"

"Blanche is unwell."

"Oh, right! Yes, right!" said Ockram. "One jumpin' monkey an' two crows can carry an hackt, I suppose? What sort of show's that, without a ankle, without a well-filled bodice t'keep their minds off your caterwaulin'."

"I assure you, sir, that the ladies and I are perfectly capable . . ."

"Perfectly capable of bein' stuck with the bill for damages."

"You wouldn't do that."

"Wouldn't I?"

"Mr. Colcutt and I have known each other these many years."

"Oh, right!" said Ockram. "Many years. So you knows how he'll view this breach o'contract. Four pounds the night, Ling an' props hextra."

"We're booked stiff tonight and tomorrow," said Wilf plaintively.

"The bigger the crowd, the bigger the disappointment."

"Yes," said Wilf, who probably subscribed to that adage too. "But we *won't* disappoint . . . disappoint them, Mr. Ockram."

"We can pull it through," said Ada, without conviction.

"Too risky. No ankles: no show."

"But . . . ?"

"Get 'er 'ere: on crutches, if you must, but get 'er 'ere."

"She can't sing."

"Then she can show them 'er knees."

"*Mister* Ockram," exclaimed Ada, "that's my daughter you're talkin' about."

Ockram wagged his finger. "Harrison Colcutt won't care if she's the flamin' Princess Royal. He'll have yer, Talboys, an' you knows it. I should never have booked a solo family hackt."

"Mr. Talboys," Mirrin said, "we might just be able to bring Blanche round in . . ."

"Who the 'ell's she?"

Ockram inspected Mirrin with surprise and, even then, with instant calculation.

"A friend," said Ada.

"A trouper?"

"No, not me," said Mirrin, uneasily.

Ockram walked slowly round her, bashing the soft curtain aside with his elbow. It was degrading, yet, strangely, flattering. The coldness of his inspection seemed unrelated to any human consideration and divorced from the admiration which the man expressed by way of a low whistle.

" 'Andsome creature, ain't yer?" he said, still looking at Mirrin's figure. "Open the coat."

"Why?"

"Is that yerself, or a muffler?"

"If you mean what I think . . ."

Flushing with mounting anger and embarrassment, Mirrin glanced up at Wilf Talboys. He too had a faint, if suppressed, glint of calculation in his eyes.

"She can sing a bit, too," said Pru. "We've heard her."

"An' juggle with plates and mesmerise helephunts," said Ockram. "Open the flamin' coat, gel."

Mirrin drew in a deep stiff breath and let indignation hiss out of her. Staring straight into Ockram's petal pale eyes, she flicked open the buttons of the overcoat and, like some regal personage divesting herself of a cloak, flung it apart.

"Does it look like a muffler now?" she demanded.

Ockram grinned.

Grimly, Mirrin reached to her knees and lifted up her brown skirts and cotton petticoat. The boot laces were tight about her ankles and the boots were muddy. She hitched the skirts high enough to show him her calves in black servants' stockings.

"See," she said. "A pair of legs: not teak either. An' they both reach the ground at the same time."

"Spunky, ain't she!" said Ockram. "For a Scotch lass."

"She can sing 'Lochinvar'," said Pru. "Make the tears start t'yer eyes."

"Wait," Mirrin protested.

"If she's got a voice, hany kind of voice," Ockram said, "she's on. Like hit or lump hit, Talboys. She's with you, or you're howt."

"Mirrin, please?" Ada Talboys said. "Try it, please."

"I do know some Scottish songs," said Mirrin. "But what about rehearsal, music, the orchestra?"

"Hardly a man among them can read the notes of the scale," said Wilf, shrugging. "Five old stagers buskin' it by ear that's all they are."

Mirrin looked wildly round. Ockram had hopped down into the orchestra trough again and, vaulting the rail, had begun to stalk up the central aisle towards the single gas lamp which lit the entrance door.

"Sing," he shouted. "Sing loud enough t'let me 'ear back 'ere, an' you're on for the run, gel."

"I'll kill that wee . . ." Mirrin said. Her threat was obliterated by notes on the piano. Hastily, Pru struck a selection of chords. The sound went out into the empty hall, echoing, yet merry, giving dimension to the dust and vacant musty spaces.

Mirrin remembered the barrackers at the political rallies at which she'd spoken when she was young and ardent and all for the cause of the working man. She remembered Christy Moran, the agitator, who had looked at her sometimes just the way Ockram had that evening and how Christy, the cunning wee devil, had gently persuaded her to wear a white cotton blouse which showed off her figure and how some of the men, many of them in fact, had paused not to hear the preaching of radicalism or the sound common sense of militant policies but just to get a free eyeful of female contours.

What difference was there? It was part of the male nature. Aye, and if she was honest with herself, part of her nature too.

"*Sing!*" Ockram shouted. He lit a pipe. She could see the match flame in the gloom. "Chant. Anythin', gel."

"Please, Mirrin," said Ada, touching her arm. "Help us!"

Was this worse than a tentful of tinkers stinking in the ferment of a week-long rain? Was this worse than a tongue webbed with cotton lint, the pulsation of the threshing flails on the frames? Was this worse, even, than Blacklaw's dreich coal chutes vomiting out their filth shift after shift. There was at least a light out there, the wavering flame of a match, and the jangle of a pianoforte, and some gaiety, however spurious, tinting the shabbiness and fashioning a kind of cheer.

There was excitement in her, an instinctive response to the challenge of oppression, fertilised perhaps by her dislike of Ockram, another extension of the slave-master, the demanding voice of capitalist authority. She fixed her eyes on the warped boards of the stage and came forward.

"Look't the show-off," Mam had said when she was strunting about the kitchen to catch her Da's attention. "Look't that lassie. Someday we'll hire a hall an' put her in it."

Now there was a hall, though Mam wasn't doing the hiring. Mirrin concentrated, running over the tunes and the verses of all the songs she had ever learned, her mouth dry, her throat beginning to tighten. She knew where she was. She had a sense of that, though she stood only on the pallid outer ring of the pool of gaslight. Before her were the cowled footlights, the tissue stuff of the reflectors.

"Come on, come on, gel. I 'aven't got all night."

Deliberately she put her hands on her hips, cocking out her elbows, her head still hanging so that her face could not be seen, then, even as Wilf and Ada began to coax her again she lifted up her head and launched into the first verse of Rabbie Burns' most beautiful song, that one which, wherever or whenever it was sung back home in Scotland, brought tears to the eyes with its sadness and romance.

"O my love is like the red red rose, that's
newly sprung in June,
O my love is like a melody that's sweetly
played in tune."

Behind her, the piano accompaniment stopped. Mirrin's voice strengthened. She could not halt herself now. Her gaze was fixed on the front row of the 'gods'. She thought of her mother there holding her father's hand, thought of nobody else, nothing else of which she was consciously aware. Yet the song and the singing of it, the resonances in her throat, drew a passion of wistful longing from her soul and made her, for those few minutes, oblivious to the place and the circumstances of her performance. She would have sung no less feelingly had she been alone upon a heather hillside far above Blacklaw. It was an instinctive release, a commitment to the power of melody within her.

"*But fare thee well, my only love, and*
fare thee well a while,
And I will come again, my love, tho'
'twere ten thousand mile."

She let her voice drop and fall away into the silence of the empty auditorium. Her hands slipped down from her sides. She felt ungainly and awkward, yet uncaring. She had sung for one reason and, through the song, had discovered quite another.

After a long pause, she shouted, "Well, Mr. Ockram?"

After an even longer pause, the laconic answer came back, "You'll do."

She was not afraid of them. That, Wilf declared, was the truly amazing thing about young Miss Stalker. She did not appear to be intimidated by the animate faces that crammed the rows below her and piled up tier on tier to the 'gods'. When she first stepped on to the stage of the Civic that Boxing Day night at fourteen minutes past eight o'clock it seemed that the tusks of the footlights were her only protection against a wall of men, women and children, a wall that might topple down and crush her at any moment. Some halls, Pru confided, imposed that scary illusion on performers. The trick was not to let the first impression scatter your wits and make you go all taut and sandy in the throat.

The waiting period might have been worse than the step on to the stage. But there was so much to be done, so much advice to absorb that she had no time to brood, carried along by Wilf's professionalism and Ada's soothing reassurance that the folk would take to her, consoled by the fact that Pru could adapt the 'twiddlyits' to suit Mirrin's occasionally wayward tempo during songs. As Wilf said, the five-man orchestra was hardly more than a col-ection of public-house buskers. Even uniform black cotton jackets nd 'spring-onion' ties could not disguise their cheery, beery ountenances or cause the cornet to quite harmonise with the iddle or the percussive gentleman to restrain himself in the horuses.

But it was the costumes that brought Mirrin to a full realisation hat she was about to become a public performer. The costumes ave her confidence by removing her identity. It would not be lex Stalker's daughter who would skip out there in to the vast pen expanse of the stage and show herself off to three or four undred strangers, but another girl entirely. The costumes were othing special, a makeshift, pinned-in dress or two from Blanche's amper, a tartan apron and matching plaid that Pru had preserved rom days of yore and a bright tartan cap, a 'tammy', that per-isted in slipping over Mirrin's nose when she danced, and which mused the audience so much that it became quite a featured rop.

It was typically generous of the Talboys to allow the four acts of heir family show to be taken over by a stranger, an amateur at hat. They were flexible enough to alter and adapt the structure of ehearsed scenes and sketches to include as much as possible of Mirrin Stalker who, from her first appearance, had the audience n her side and, by the second intermission, could have led them arefoot over the Rockie Mountains. After a while Mirrin made no ones about it that she was a novice. She played up the impromptu ature of her stage-craft, gaining sufficient confidence to call out to he spectators and invite their participation, to draw them into the un and games and to exercise her caustic wit with a quickness that temmed from her days as a pithead orator.

She stunned them at the end of the first act with her rendition of The Red, Red Rose', left them rollicking at the end of the second vith 'My Name is Annie Campbell', and took a trick on her one nd only appearance in Act Three by strolling across the stage with bottle of porter in one hand and a wedge of cheese in the other vhile poor Wilf was endeavouring to sing 'Hark, the Goddess Diana' in duet with Pru.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Talboys. I shouldn't have done that."

"Think nothing of it, young lady. What other ditties do you know?"

Eyes shining, cheeks flushed, Mirrin answered. "Hundreds."

"You lead the singing, then."

"But . . ."

"Go on with you, lassie," Ada said.

"Can you play 'Serenading Sara' on your banjo, Wilf?" Mirrin asked.

"That's it: that's the one."

"Ling, find me a cloth cap."

"Yus," Ling said.

She longed to go on again: she wanted the evening to continue for ever. She felt that she was loved by them and was lifted by her desire to please them, to draw them out of their miseries for a while and prolong their pleasure in the show. Just by singing, she could make them sad; by singing she could make them uproariously happy. It was not her talent as a song-bird or her skill as a tapper but the fundamental fact that she was one of them, a big, tall handsome girl who could blend sentiment and sauce at a pitch they could understand and appreciate. She had no pretensions, only a verve that most of the audience had had dinned out of them by the oppressive conditions of life in the mill town, and a waggish energy that reminded older folk of how it had been to be young and brimful of enthusiasm for life.

Ling's own cloth cap upon her head, thumbs stuck into a make-believe waistcoat, Mirrin adopted the long stride and exaggerated swagger of a man and, with a knowing tilt to her head, rolled out on to the stage, followed by Wilf armed like a troubador with his banjo.

" 'Twas late at night to see her
By love's passion I was led,
I was so disappointed
When I found they'd gone to bed."

She began to mime, a technique that Ada had to perfection and which, Mirrin thought, was one well worth emulating. She sang loudly, the rapt audience beginning to giggle already at the *doubles entendres*. Below her, the five cheery buskers were grinning widely, resting their instruments to look up at her. She strutted and wagged her head in time to the melody and let Wilf run a little to catch up with her. She made Wilf pause, the audience wait for each of the funny lines, breaking the song up, as she had heard it done once at a kirk concert by Bray Donaldson who had tippled too much and was severly rebuked in public by the minister the following Sunday.

"The window rose, her mother
Emptied something on my head.
I was wringing wet through
Serenading Sara.
Just Serenading Sara
Serenading Sara after dark."

With gathering motions of her arms, standing alone in the front centre of the stage, the fumes from the footlamps coming up over her, Mirrin invited the audience to join in that saucy, catchy and very well-known song. And they did, one great shouting, swaying sort of voice swelling up from the once-shabby interior of the Grossby Civic Hall, through 'Sara', and 'Bubbles' and 'The Flying Trapeze' and others led by Wilf and Ada, to finish with the ultimate in working-class camaraderie, 'Paddle your Own Canoe'. It was Mirrin's choice, a remembered classic from the miners' rallies on the green field outside Hamilton.

"Then love your neighbour as yourself
As the world you go travelling through,
And never sit down with a tear or a frown,
But paddle your own canoe."

When it was over, the curtain lowered, the audience howling for more, Mirrin took a bow herself. She received not only a standing ovation but also a party of boarders who, far from wishing her harm, flung coppers on to the stage in token of their gratitude. The full troupe took the second curtain call, then the threadbare drape descended for the last time and Mirrin staggered back from it as if she had wakened from a trance.

Wilfrid Talboys hugged her. Ada and Pru hugged her and, within minutes, Hilda and Ernest Dawson arrived from the stalls to hug her too. The two men carried her away between them in an impromptu jig up and down the creaking stage.

"Our Mirrin showing off," Mam Stalker would have said.

The thought did not sober Mirrin now, nor reduce her gaiety one iota. She was home at last.

Because Edward was asleep, they were not able to light the lamp. They pulled their chairs close to the sloping window where the pale gleam of the snow which had fallen that afternoon gave them sufficient light to consume the supper of pork pies and bottled stout that Ernest had sent up to the room.

The Grossby engagement was over. It had been the most successful series of performances that Wilfrid Talboys and the Cropley Sisters had ever given. The house had been choked for every show and Ockram would have signed them on for another month if he could have wangled the lease of the hall. As it was he booked them in at the Bridlington Variety theatre for three weeks, risking his neck with Harrison Colcutt and braving the dim January season which was notoriously unfavourable for touring troupers. But Bridlington Theatre was new and bright and trimmed with gilt and, importantly, not too large to lose the Talboys' rapport with their audience between footlights and stalls.

Each morning now Mirrin rehearsed with Wilf, each afternoon with Ada, Pru and Blanche. Sensing the power of the usurper, Blanche had returned chastened to the fold and, though she sulked and would hardly address herself to Mirrin, she had drawn closer to her father as if she feared that he would cast her aside. Nothing was said about her behaviour on Boxing Day, no reference was ever made to it or to the withered posy or sepia photograph.

"Are you sure this is right for you, Mirrin?" Lily asked. "Is it really what you want?"

"I can't explain it," Mirrin said quietly. "I can't explain it even to myself. But standing up on a stage, even at rehearsals when the hall's empty and bleak, it's . . . it's as if it was where I belong."

"My father says it's where you belong," said Lily.

"It's the Talboys, too. I like them so much. They give me so much."

"They get enough in return," said Lily. "An' this is only the beginnin', Mirrin. You could go a long way."

Mirrin shrugged. She was not vain, would not, she hoped, develop that kind of vanity. "I want t'learn, Lily. I want t'learn how t'dance properly, how t'sing in all the keys. Most of all I want t'learn how t'walk on a stage an' act the way Ada does when she sets her mind to it."

"But in a year, Mirrin, will it not pall?"

"Maybe — but I doubt it." Mirrin smiled. "A new audience every night, as Wilf says: a new challenge."

"An' when the challenges are met, what then?"

"The theatre's all challenge, I think," said Mirrin. "I've heard the bad side, too, from Pru and Ada. Oh, no, they don't intend me to cherish my illusions for too long."

"Wilf wants a London billing. More than anything else in this world he wants top billing in a decent theatre in London. I've heard him talkin' with father, talkin' of the Islington Palace, the Holborn Empire, Gatti's, even the Gaiety. It's you, Mirrin. You've given Wilf fresh hope."

"I've still a lot to learn," said Mirrin. "Besides, I'm not sure I've got anythin' to offer London. It's all very well, Lily, when I sing an' dance to folk like my own folk, labourers and cotton workers and factory hands, but I'm not the grand lady sort."

"Maybe you could learn to be that, too, Mirrin."

Mirrin sighed. "I'll take it all as it comes. I can hardly believe that a couple of months have changed me so completely."

"Paddle your own canoe, luv," said Lily. "As long as you're sure you're doin' the right thing in plungin' into that sort of life."

"Aye, I'm sure. But you know me, Lily, I'm *always* sure I'm doing the right thing."

Lily laughed softly. "Maybe that's what makes you do so much with your life, Mirrin."

"Aye, but it's folk like you that come to the rescue when owt goes wrong," Mirrin said. Suddenly, she reached out and embraced her sister-in-law. "Without you, Lily, I would have died in that gutter."

"I doubt it," Lily said. "Anyhow, Mirrin, you'll be back in Grossby soon like as not."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Mirrin said. "It's the way it goes — round an' round, like the Merry-Ma-Tanzie."

Disturbed by their voices Edward stirred in his sleep. Mirrin crossed the little room to look down at her nephew. How like her brother he was; how like her father too in some ways. She quelled nostalgia, thinking instead of Blacklaw's dirt and despair. She was well out of it; this wee lad too was well out of it. He wouldn't die young in a sweating seam or be scarred by fire damp or choked by gas or fumes. He would never be a hunched-up prisoner of the pit like his father or his grandfather. He was well shot of that fate, thank God.

Dropping to her knees beside the cot, her hand went out to the sleeping child and she brushed his fair hair lightly with her forefinger, crooning the beginning of 'Merry-Ma-Tanzie'.

"No, Mirrin, not that one," murmured Lily.

"I'm sorry, luv," Mirrin said. "How about this for an old auntie's lullaby, then?"

Very softly, very sweetly, Mirrin sang,

"*Five white ponies up on a hill,*
Now they dance: now they stand still,
And they wait for the lad to creep out of the mill,
Then they prance away with the dawning,
They dance away with the dawning."

"Like you, Mirrin," Lily said.

"Aye, like me."

PART TWO

Butterfly Summer

One

MAY CAME IN clear, bright and warm. The grass on the Bruntsfield Links and the slopes of the Salisbury Crags reminded Drew of fine nap velvet, and the sea in the far distance was like polished silver plate. Daffodils burgeoned in the gardens and many new green leaves clung to the grey stone walls of the University's academic walks. Outwith the gates, the ladies of the town had shaken out their light ensembles to show an inch or two more of white throats and gently curving bosoms. This display was greatly appreciated by the McAlmond set, including its 'tame intellectual' Andrew Stalker, who had transformed himself over the past months from a meek hanger-on into an opinion-maker of the first magnitude, holding the same august, if mysterious, position in the hierarchy as a druid to a Pictish king.

The period between Christmas and spring had been vital to Andrew Stalker's development. He had gained a confident suavity through regular contact with Fraser, Mellish and the Sprotts. He had impressed his tutors by his questing mind and had made his mark on the class by subtle irreverence towards the very tutors who lauded him. Most important of all, however, he had laid the foundations of a social career that, when crowned with a degree in Law and a post in a legal firm, would stand him in excellent stead. He had also buried the hatchet with Gow Havershaw — a gentleman too cautious to antagonise an intimate of the McAlmonds — and he had gleaned much sound information on the inner workings of 'the back-scratching businessmen of Edinburgh' from his friend and confidant Daniel Horn. Planetree

Gardens, Morningside, had become his home, and William Blair, a douce Aberdonian, valet to Fraser, had, by proxy, become Stalker's erstwhile servant too, cleaning and ironing his wardrobe and seeing to it that the daily maids kept Andrew's small basement room in new-pin condition along with the young master's suite.

Fraser responded well to having Law explained to him in words of one syllable and being bullied into boning up the big, simple foolscap notes that Drew tacked on the wall of the study parlour where, fortified by tobacco and strong coffee, the collier's son earned his keep by honest, conscientious academic toil. The results were gratifying. Fraser had outstripped the Sprotts in curriculum placement and had even been praised in class by Angus Salmon, no less.

Easter had been spent at Pearsehill. The five young friends had braved the sleet showers to ride over the policies during the day and had spent the evenings eating and drinking moderately and being 'awfully civilised' to Lady Isobel, talking literature and philosophy and doling out discreet city gossip which had come their way during term.

By the beginning of April, Drew felt secure. His veneer of refinement became more polished with each passing week. In a year or so he would be completely indistinguishable from the high-toned fellows with whom he associated. That fierce, precocious intelligence which had set him apart from his generation back in Blacklaw kept him ahead of the Edinburgh pack.

They strolled, that May afternoon, through the gate of the College courtyard in their familiar 'fighting wedge', three and two, inner arms linked, canes whirling, arrogant chins lifted to survey the changes in the busy scene that the passage of the short academic day had brought but, most of all, to appraise the ladies' springtime fripperies and consequent 'revelations'.

In fact the McAlmond set had just paused to comment on the amplitude of one young heifer, who was very well aware of the students' attention, when an old woman shuffled from a niche behind the granite horsepost by the flank of the arch and laid her gnarled and filthy hand on Drew's elbow.

Startled, he flinched away from her.

The beggar was between sixty and seventy, her bony body draped in a faded dress, held together, so it seemed, by a heavy shawl pinned with brass brooches. Her skin was pallid and grimy, her hair lank. When she spoke her lips caved over toothless gums and her breath was foul with gin, though she was not drunk.

"Get back to your sewer, you old cow," Balfour Sprott exploded, pushing the woman from behind. Drew stayed him, making a barrier with his cane. The gesture was inexplicable. Perhaps he recognised the seriousness in her beady eyes, the direct attention she gave him.

"Beggar bitch!" said Fraser. "Strike her off, Andrew."

"Wait," Drew said. "I wish to have a word with this person."

"Oh-ho!" Innes Sprott said. "Undoubtedly she's a lady in charge of a soup kitchen."

Drew said, "Then I will bring you a bowl, Innes: cold left-overs."

The young men left, all except Mellish who loitered curiously within earshot.

Drew said, "Hector, will you apologise to the fellows for me. I will catch you up shortly."

"Who is she?"

Drew forced an evil grin. The woman waited impassively, confirming his instinctive judgment that she had come for him and that whatever message she carried, from Blacklaw perhaps, would best be heard in privacy.

Drew said, "I will explain in a day or two, Hector; in detail, if you wish."

Mellish did not take the bait, the hint that some delicious piece of sinfulness was simmering on the stove. He knew only too well that that was not Stalker's style. But he appeared to accept the suggestive wink that Drew gave him and, nodding, turned on his heel and walked on to join the others at the corner of the bridge.

"That was wise," the woman said. "Did y'tak' me for your mammy, then?"

"What do you want with me?"

"Ach, Mr. Fancy-Dan, you've come a fair bit since y'used t'slip int' the *Cockerel* for free tuck."

Sweat started on Drew's brow.

"I'll give you no money, you old beggar. I'm not ashamed of my past."

"The lass's sick."

"What lass?" He knew what lass. He fought against the impulse to glance behind him at the corner.

"The Campbell lass. Her time's come early. She's sick, verra sick."

"What's it to me?"

"I'll tell ye, son, what it is t'you. She's dyin' in my property an' if she dies, delivers, or baith, I'll have the polis sniffin' round like dugs."

"How did you find me?"

"She telt me where."

"She's lying."

"Phizz!" the woman said. "I'm no' carin' i she's lyin' like a lord. The girl's dyin' an' that's the truth o'it. So it's your peck o'trouble, sonnie, or it's me for a word wi' the college authorities. An' where'll that leave you?"

Drew smiled. "The girl is a conniving little whore," he said, pleasantly. "But I want no trouble by implication; so I'll come."

"Implickaton? That's a braw way o'puttin' it," the woman said. "Any roads, it was yoursel' that implickated her, an' I'm the one as knows it."

"Where is she?"

"Not a half mile awa'," the woman said. "In the 'dykes."

"Give me the address an' I'll come this evening."

The woman's lips crinkled and her brown gums showed in a fleeting grimace. "B'tonight your bonnie wee bedmate may be in Heaven."

"Very well," Drew said. "Will you take me there now?"

"That's what I cam' for, sonnie. It's your peck o'trouble, remember, no' mines."

The area lay by the South Backs at the bottom of Canongate's crosslink with Cowgate, a region that Drew, even in his most exploratory mood, had always avoided because of its foetid squalor. Of all the blocks and vennels in the fair city of Edinburgh, this acre was the most foul, a haunt of alcoholics and disease-ridden prostitutes who lived like rats round close-packed middens that had once been tavern yards and the workplaces of small disreputable traders.

Some evidence of jobbing still pertained here and there. The rectangle of the 'dykes where the old woman had her 'property' was rented to a tanner and skinner as a slaughter shed, the enterprise owned and operated by two elderly relatives of the crone. The stench was gut-churning. The spectacle of rotting, bloated animal carcases hung up to await the axe, great pyramids of meaty bones and ill-cured hides and fleeces draped over chaps and rails was like a vision of hell. An ancient horse, hardly less raddled than the cadavers on its cart, slumped in the shafts while crows and gulls and other carrion eaters perched on its insensitive spine and yacked defiance at the intruders. Over this scene the mid-afternoon sunlight smiled anomalously, spring-like and serene.

A handkerchief to his face, Drew followed the old woman through the yard, up a gallows-like wooden staircase and along a canted balcony to a door sunk into the joints of the building, a door down which rain and gutter muck had poured for countless years from the slatey nostrils of the roof. Slick black mud oozed in under the rotted door and half across the room in which Heather Campbell had spent the last week of her confinement.

There was no table, no chair, only a flagstone hearth and, close to it, a broken bedstead. As soon as Drew saw Heather he knew that the old woman had not exaggerated. A finger of sunlight, diminished in strength by the state of the tiny protruding window, lay upon the coverlet, upon the grotesquely humped mound of Heather's stomach, a massive contrast to the emaciation of her face and arms. The mattress was verminous. Mice skittered in the corners of the room, too numerous and bold to start away at the young man's entrance.

"How . . . how much does she pay you for this?"

"Florin a week," the crone said. "An' what's mair, she's fower weeks'n arrears. You'll b'payin' me that, like as not?"

Heather lifted her head an inch from the mattress and squinted out of eyes that were like slivers of tarnished tin. "D . . . Drew?"

The old woman cackled. She pushed Drew in the small of the back. "Hear how she's cryin' out for'r man."

Drew swallowed. He said, "When is the . . . the infant due?"

"No' for three weeks yet. But it seems he canny wait t'shove his way int' the warld."

"Drew?"

"G'on, she'll no' bite you."

As he moved closer to the end of the bed, he realised that the girl had sensed rather than seen him. The lead-rimmed eyes opened. He watched in horror as her lips parted, sticky with mucus and a smile started into the flesh of her cheeks, a smile that was at once contorted into an agony that brought her rearing up towards him, screaming in anguish.

He did not, could not, touch her. He would have backed away and fled the place if the owner had not thoughtfully planted herself in the doorway.

"Fine work, y'done, Fancy-Dan," the old woman said. "A grand night's implickaton."

Revulsion and fear gripped Drew. "What . . . what d'you expect me to do for her now?"

The old woman squinted. "There's a midwife'll cam' along sine I tell'r — but it'll cost you."

"I'll pay."

"An' when it's over, you'll be takin' what's left out o'my lodgin'."

Take her: that was an irony. Take her where? Besides, there would be nothing to take. Inexpert as he was, even he could tell that Heather Campbell was too far gone to stand much chance of recovery. And if she died . . . ? Damn her: he should have had the courage to murder her as he had planned back before Christmas.

"All right," said Drew. "I'll take all the responsibility. Now, I want you to stay with her for a couple of hours."

"I'll b'doin' no such thing."

"I need to fetch money, don't I? I will pay you what's owin' then."

"If y'don't come back," the crone threatened, "I'll b'up at yon university again t'morrow."

Drew shuddered. He would have enough explaining to do as it was. He would need to invent some plausible lie to cover his disappearance for the night. Suddenly, he realised that such niceties might be rendered irrelevant. By tomorrow he might be stuck with a bastard child and expelled, if not from the faculty, at least from Fraser's company. His only hope now was that they both might die, and die soon, before this hideous crisis threw him too deeply into debt. Under the circumstances he could not borrow from Fraser. Daniel Horn was the fellow to shell out a pound or two, no questions asked. Daniel and he understood each other. He would go from here to Havershaw's, tap Daniel for a personal loan. He had some savings in his apartment in Morningside, too; ten or twelve shillings.

First, however, he must send for Kate. He glanced at the cheap watch he had bought to ornament his vest pocket. It was not yet four o'clock. With luck Kate would be here before midnight; train services direct from Hamilton had been much improved of late. There were so many things to be done, not for Heather Campbell but for himself.

"Drew?"

Her eyes were closed. She formed his name without, it seemed, opening her lips at all now. Her skin was translucent. She lay so still that he thought for a moment that she might already be dead. Only a teardrop sliding from one lash contradicted the corpse-like immobility.

Coldly, he told the woman, "I'll be back here by six o'clock without fail. Send out for the midwife immediately."

"Aye, master; anythin' you say."

She was enjoying the situation. Despair engulfed him. This hag was an extension of the Blacklaw women who had sneered at him for trying to pull himself out of the muck. It gave her enormous satisfaction to see him hauled from his lofty perch. How could he explain that he had achieved that status by his own efforts, that he deserved what he got and what he would get, this crisis notwithstanding?

"Never fear, you'll get your damned cash," he said.

"I will that."

Turning, Drew reached past the woman and dragged open the door. Even the sunlight had turned to the colour of blood. The stench of the slaughter yard came up forcibly to meet him.

"Hoy?" the woman said, catching his arm as he endeavoured to brush past her. "Sonnie?"

"What?"

"Y'never gave her a kiss."

With an expression of disgust, Drew thrust himself on to the balcony and hurried along it to the steps which would carry him away from that place and all its significances. But before he reached the street, the tortured screaming of the girl had started up again and seemed to ring in his head all the way uphill to Havershaw's.

Kate crouched on the front step of the narrow house. The main street tonight was full of life. The children were not yet in bed, played peever, hoops and cuddie-loup-the-dyke in the sun. Two little girls had brought flowers from the meadow behind the Poulter's burn and were threading them into posies on the bench outside Mrs. Grimmond's across the way. Kate was stiff from the hard day's shift at the sorting troughs but felt more cheerful than she had done for months now, responding to the fine spring evening like everybody else. Mam was indoors preparing supper. Betsy would be home at any minute, jaunting down the street from the horse-bus terminus by the *Lantern*.

In her hand Kate held a small battered axe. She was chopping lengths of kindling for tomorrow's fire. Chapping with the axe, she broke the plug into finger-length splits, breathing in the sharp resinous smell, so clean and stimulating. Strange to think that the amber wood was the constituent of coal, that gritty black substance that hid itself away underground.

There was an odd silence in the street. Kate looked up from the kindling block. The games had temporarily stopped. A hoop trundled aimlessly away and skittered to a halt, falling on its side. The wee flower girls were looking round-eyed across the street to the Stalkers' side of the pavement. From her kneeling position, Kate stared uphill.

The young man walked with a steady loping stride. He wore a dark brown pea-jacket and light brown trousers and had a crimson hat on his head, like a bandsman. But he was no bandsman. Even Kate knew who he was and what he represented.

The young man came on, inexorably approaching the Main Street's end, the last house. Heart thudding with anxiety, Kate scrambled to her feet.

"Stalker," the uniform said. "I'm lookin' for Stalker."

"I'm Kate Stalker."

"That's you then. Special delivery; Herrick's Cross-country Messenger Service."

"Where . . . where from?"

"Edinburgh."

It could only be Drew. He had met with an accident. Kate drew the young man closer to the wall so that Mam could not see from the kitchen window.

Unbuttoning a deep pocket inside his jacket the messenger extracted a long buff-coloured envelope and a flat canvas-backed book. He opened the book, pulled a pencil stump from his cuff, licked the point and handed envelope, pencil and book to Kate Stalker.

"Can you write?"

"Aye."

"Sign for acceptance."

Laboriously Kate pencilled her name on the line provided. Against the blank, in firm brisk copperplate, was the name of the sender: *Andrew Stalker.* It had cost Drew one guinea, the price was there too.

Kate held the letter in her hand, hardly daring to open it.

If Drew had actually sent the message, then he could not be badly injured or sick or dead; at least it did not seem likely. But he had paid a guinea, a small fortune, to reach her with all haste. She looked helplessly at the uniform.

"Read it, Miss," he advised. "A reply might be needed."

Kate tore open the envelope.

The buff-tinted paper was covered in Drew's own writing.

Kate: come at once to Skinner's Courtyard, Carlindykes Road, Edinburgh. I am not ill but I am in grave straits and have urgent need of you here. Please come alone. It is no place for mother. I enclose a banknote for one pound to assist in your travelling expenses. I want you to come immediately, that is, tonight. Andrew. Postscript: if you are unable to come personally, return a message by the Herrick Service, which will cost the one pound only. I need you here. Drew.

The young messenger watched Kate closely. He had had to catch swooners before now, for he was often the bearer of bad tidings.

"How . . . how quick can I get t'Edinburgh?" Kate asked him.

"How soon can you leave, Miss?"

"Ten minutes."

"Come wi' me, then. I've got the train connections all worked out for me. I'll be home, in Edinburgh that is, by half past eleven."

"I'd . . . I'd offer y'a cup of tea . . ."

"I understand," the young man said.

Hurrying now, Kate burst into the kitchen. She explained to Mam what had occurred and, a little to her surprise, did not have to squander precious minutes in consoling her mother.

"It's idle t'speculate, Kate," Mam said, frowning. "We can't tell what it's like for our Drew there, or what he's been up to."

"Mam, I'm scared."

Flora Stalker looked at the letter once more. She read slowly.

"It's just you he wants, Kate: not me. He makes that clear."

"Mam, what'll I do?"

"Do? You'll change your dress, put on your bonnet and overcoat, an' take the money from the jar . . ."

"The money?"

"A safeguard," Mam said. "If our Drew's in hot water, it'll have somethin' t'do with money, sure as fate."

"But he sent a pound: I don't understand."

"Change, Kate, an' just get there as fast as y'can."

"Aye, Mam," Kate said, and hurried on into the back bedroom to pull her best Sunday dress from the wardrobe.

Drew pressed his shoulders into the flaking plaster in the corner by the cold hearth. Now that the sun had gone down behind the Castle Rock the room was chill. He shivered and huddled inside the Ulster he had the foresight to fetch from his room in Planetree Gardens. Mercifully, Fraser had not been at home. Drew had left a cryptic message with the valet informing Fraser that he had been called away on urgent business and would not be back that night.

Morningside had been his last port of call. He had already slunk into Havershaw's chambers and borrowed five guineas from Daniel Horn. Drew could not be sure if the guineas came from Horn's private fund or from Havershaw's box. He had no time to fret over the source. Herrick's office, at the top of the Mound, had been his final stop before he swung out into the suburbs. He took a cab back from Morningside to Skinner's Courtyard and reached the room above the slaughter sheds only a short while after the midwife's arrival.

The woman's name was Lumsden. She was even more ugly than Mrs. Nimmo, the owner of the premises. She had a hunched shoulder and a scooped-out face, pocked with the scars of childhood disease. Though her experience in coaxing infants into the world might be considerable, Drew suspected that her main business was terminating unwanted pregnancies among the whores who plied their trade in taverns like the *Cockerel*. Mrs. Lumsden seemed totally unconcerned at the condition of her patient. For all the effect they had on her, Heather's screams and wrenching groans might have been the crooning of a highland lullaby.

Taking in a shuddering breath, Drew washed his hands over his face and peered blearily across the room at the bed, pushed into the centre of the room under a smokey lamp which hung from a wire hook in the ceiling.

The Nimmo woman had gone long ago. For three hours now he had been alone with Mrs. Lumsden and the creature on the bed. The shrieking remnant of the girl he had known once as Heather Campbell seemed, in the trauma of sickness and delivery, to have relinquished her identity, even her humanity.

From time to time in her ministrations, Mrs. Lumsden would turn, hawk and spit on the floor, wiping her lips on her naked forearm. She used no instruments at all. The full range of her equipment came in a burlap sack — swaddles of boiled rags, lengths of hemp rope and a pickle jar full of goose grease: no pans of boiling water or soft blankets such as Drew had seen in Blacklaw when the mysterious act of birth was taking place in one of Main Street's cottages and his Mam or Kate had been called in to assist the motherly village midwife, Alice Lorne. He wished that Alice Lorne was here now instead of this gross, disgusting female.

At first he had wandered anxiously about the room, steering well clear of the bed. But at length fatigue had forced him down on to the floor. In the corner among mouse dirt and the scattered cinders of old fires, he had tried, in vain, to shut out the noises, smells and sights of that place.

Night had brought the Skinners' yard to life. For a busy couple of hours, carts rumbled in and out with the cadavers that the Nimmos had bought that day. Drew could hear the fleshy chop of axes, the rasp of saws, the hoarse bellowing of men below. He had tried to blot that out too, spinning his mind like a humming top, lashing it to make it stand on points of logic and balance there long enough to permit him to connive. But it was useless. His senses were raped by the impressions of that place, by the magnitude of the event that was happening not ten feet away.

After a time, when the courtyard had quietened again, he found himself watching the midwife's horrifying manoeuvres, the knotting of hemp lengths about Heather's ankles and shoulders, the splaying of her knees, the arching thrusts of her back and hips as she sought, by instinct now, to expel from her ravaged body the child that engorged her womb.

Birth was not wondrous, not even decently dignified. In his wildest imaginings he had never thought it to be so agonising. Six children his mother had borne. Six times she had gone through this rending struggle. It had been bad, he had heard, with himself and Betsy; twins were never easy. Bad: the word was inadequate to cover the tortures of birth. How could any woman put up with it? How could any woman allow a man to lie upon her and enter her knowing that the moments of pleasure or dutiful passivity would lead eventually to this jagged peak of pain?

What had such agony to do with the libertine sports that Fraser and the Sprotts chortled over in their cups? What had it to do with the flirtatious enticements of the young girls of Blacklaw, Hamilton, Edinburgh? Why were they so feverishly keen to thrust on towards this summit? Men, of course, had no reason to care. It did not hurt them. They demanded only selfish gratification and naturally had no thought of consequence. In future, however, he vowed that he would never allow his blood to become hot with longing for a woman. In days to come, he would recall this May night, remember it with vivid clarity as the final link in a chain of cause and effect.

Heather's screams had quieted. She hardly uttered a sound now, only thin high whistling like air escaping from a toy balloon. Drew longed for a sip of wine, for water even. But he did not move. It was part of his penance to sit in that corner, see and hear the most intimate secrets of birth, of death, and be exposed in full to their ugliness.

Knees hunched, forearms resting, cheek on his wrists, he dozed for a few minutes. The precise moment when his son entered the world and his lover passed out of it went unrecorded.

Fractious whimpering rose to a wail. Drew opened his eyes and pushed himself stiffly to his feet. Even in his ignorance he knew what that sound meant. The baby had been born. No more pain. What would happen now to Heather? Would she sleep?

The midwife turned. Blood made a vast dark stain on her apron. Her bulk cast a deformed shadow across the bed but Drew could see the baby plain enough, laid on a piece of grey cloth, wrinkled, moist and discoloured like a skinned hare.

"The girl's gone, poor lassie," the woman said.

"Gone?"

"Dead. Nothin' I could b'doin' t'save her. God help this wee mite, though. He's only got you t'look after him."

"Me?"

"Tak' him. He's your son after all."

Drew stepped back against the flaking plaster. "What . . . what the devil d'you mean? What can I do with . . . with a thing like that? I . . . I don't want it."

The woman sneered. "Dare say y'don't. But there's no use denyin' he's yours. The widow Nimmo telt me the story."

"Put . . . put it down," Drew said. "Put it . . . beside its . . . his mother."

"Beside the dead?" said Mrs. Lumsden. "I'll do no sicca thing."

"All right," said Drew. "Put it on the floor then."

Shaking her head, the midwife laid the infant, swaddled in the soiled grey sheet, across the bottom of the bed. She gestured Drew to approach. He inched himself out of the neuk by the empty hearth and peered at the girl's wasted shape under the blanket. She looked serene now, as if she had found peace in a long, deep sleep. Stress had smoothed from her features. They were youthful again, unblemished, save for the darkness around her eye sockets. Her hair had a sheen to it and the midwife, for some reason, had run a comb through it to make it neat. The infant whimpered weakly.

"What . . . what about the . . . baby? Will it live?"

"Aye: he had a hard enough time gettin' here. He'll be fine when he's been fed."

"How . . . how do I feed him?"

"Employ a wet nurse."

"How much will that cost?"

"A shillin' or two."

"Can you find me one?"

"Aye," said the midwife. "There's enough o'them about."

"I . . . I want one that's clean."

"I'll see to it — once I've been paid."

Drew extracted his purse and took out two crowns. "How much?"

"That'll about cover it."

"All right," Drew said. "What else?"

"What d'ye mean?"

"What about . . . her?"

"Och, aye, the plot an' the ceremony an' the flowers."

"The death certificate."

"For a consideration I can attend t'that, too. Where'll y'put her t'rest?"

"Wherever I can."

Mrs. Lumsden cocked her head, squinting. "You're no' meanin' a pauper's grave?"

"My funds are limited," Drew had no need to justify himself to this person. "It'll make no difference to her, will it?"

"Poor hapless wee lass."

"How much for a death certificate, a legal one, and for the nurse: all inclusive?"

"Another guinea."

"That's robbery."

"Bribin' a doctor's no' cheap."

Biting his lip, Drew extracted another guinea from his purse and placed it in the woman's palm. He said, "My sister will take charge of . . . of the infant. I want the nurse here within the hour an' the certificate of death before morning. Is that clear?"

"Clear as crystal," the midwife said scathingly, and, hurriedly bundling her ropes and clothes into the burlap sack, left the young monster to his own devices.

The transaction calmed the rebellion of Drew's senses and smothered the dangerous sentiments which had risen in him when he looked down upon that lifeless thing, so pretty and pale now. The infant seemed well enough, stirring a little and vocally active, wrapped tightly in the swaddling sheet. It did not delight him. Indeed he felt a positive distaste for the snuffling creature. A tab of skin on its upper lip reminded him of a trout. The eyes were large and roving but without sight or knowledge of the world. It did not, however, seem to be in any distress in spite of its fretfulness. He did not lift or touch it, leaving it where the Lumsden woman had laid it in a fold of the blanket by its mother's feet.

He had seen death before. He had seen his father's burned body stiff with death, and, fleetingly, the doll-like corpse of his sister-in-law Lily's stillborn baby. Betsy and he had tested themselves against death; neither of them had been much affected by it, except as its circumstances affected them. But the pale, smooth features of Heather Campbell had an unexpected effect upon him. She bore no real resemblance to the girl he had held in his arms that night last autumn in the attic in Shannon's Close. She was closer now to the idealised image of a lover formed in his daydreams, still and alabaster pale and strangely refined. He could not remember her as warm and soft.

What had she said to him that last night of all? "I love you so much, Drew. If you ever want me, call my name an' I'll come."

It had seemed naïve then; now it seemed sinister.

He swallowed, murmuring, "Heather."

The sound sent him leaping back from the bed, hair bristling on his nape. The door opened and a young slattern entered — the wet nurse.

Sweating, shaking, Drew said, "Have . . . have you been paid?"

"Aye, sir."

"Then there's the baby."

Paying no attention to the corpse, the slattern smiled and lifted the baby, cradling it in her arms, neatly folding down the hems of the sheet from its face. She was a big untidy country girl. Her heavy jaw and opaque blue eyes suggested simplicity. She said nothing as she unbuttoned her ragged jacket and blouse. Drew caught a brief glimpse of her milk-swollen breasts, then turned away to look from the window across the yard. He could hear the nuzzling of the infant in the silence, the nurse's faint, pleasurable crooning.

Still trembling, Drew went out on to the gallery over the yard. He could see the gate from there. There was no barrier across it but in a slanted hut close by one of the wooden uprights a watchman had been posted. He leaned over a brazier filled with glowing coke, smoking a clay pipe, a very old man, patient as Job. Absently, Drew supposed a watchman was necessary to keep the poor from raiding the flensed carcases, stealing the fleeces and untanned hides. An owl swooped from the ridge of the sheds. Rats squeaked down by the inner wall. He watched the cobbles just outside the gate. It was after ten now. He prayed that Kate had got his message, and would arrive soon. He did not doubt that she would come. Laughter and raised voices. A fiddle scraped shrilly. Somebody, a woman, yawped out a few bars of a song. Foolishly, he wondered who was flitting between the tables of the *Cockerel* tavern now, in Heather Campbell's place. Those few free suppers had cost him very dear in the end.

Exhaustion made it all unreal.

When the nurse had finished she left, promising to return first thing in the morning, before dawn. She would be 'hurting' again, she told him, and the babby'd be hungry. Now the infant slept, as motionless as his mother.

At ten minutes to eleven, Mrs. Lumsden returned. He saw her from the window. She did not enter the yard, however, to deliver the signed certificate of death personally. Drew waited on the balcony as the watchman toiled up the steps and handed him the folded document.

"I expect my sister here shortly," Drew said, giving the old man a shilling. "Will you show her up?"

The phrase had such an aristocratic ring that the irony of the situation brought a sudden welling of sorrow. It grieved him that Kate should find him in this place. He should have greeted her at his home in Planetree Gardens. She should have met his friends the McAlmonds, Archibald and Lady Isobel in particular. *That* was his milieu, the measure of his achievement, not this squalid garret, this millstone incident which made him appear to be a lecher and wastrel, worse than the worst of the Williams' tribe who lived in a fortress of battered tin shacks in the shadow of the Clayburn coups back in Blacklaw.

Sobbing, Drew crouched down in the corner to wait.

"Drew. Waken up, Drew."

It was a year since last they had met. That twelve months had not been kind to his sister. She looked weary and old, he thought, in that first instant impression when he opened his eyes and struggled to his feet.

"Kate," he said. "I'm grateful to you for coming so quickly."

"The girl?" Kate said. "Is . . . that what's wrong?"

"Yes."

"My God!"

"The girl," said Drew, "And the . . . the child: more particularly the child."

"Who was she?"

"A girl," said Drew. "Just a girl."

"An' the baby?"

Drew was silent. Kate turned, gripped him by the collar of the Ulster and yanked him towards her. She too was emotionally keyed up. It had not occurred to Drew that Kate of all people might have a temper, might have been strained by the events of the winter and the worry of the Special Delivery message.

"Is it yours, Drew? Is that baby yours?" she demanded. "*Tell me the truth.*"

"I . . . I wish I could be sure," Drew said.

"An' the girl: who is she?"

"Heather Campbell. She threw herself at me," Drew said. "I was a fool, Kate. I realise that now. I encountered her in a tavern, the place where I ate my meals. I was lonely, an' . . . an' she . . ."

"You married her?"

"What?" Drew almost laughed. "Lord, no. I'm not that daft!"

"But you . . . you did . . . ?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I told you, she threw herself at me, on my . . . my mercy, y'might say. I was lonely, Kate, an' she came t'my rooms one night with some story about how she'd been flung out of her lodgin'. She asked if she could stay with me for a while. I gave in. I couldn't help myself. I gave in to her."

"How long did she live with you?"

"Not long: a few nights, that's all. I knew it was dangerous t'associate with a girl like that. I insisted that she find another lodgin'."

"*You're lying.*"

"I'm nothing of the kind. I saw her for another month, now an' again. She was persistent, though I admit I enjoyed her . . . her company."

"You slept with her?"

"Yes, yes: I admit it."

"An' then?"

"I told her not t'come back. The fact is she'd found somebody else anyhow. She . . . she was that kind of girl."

Kate gestured to the bed. "That wee lass was . . . was . . ."

Drew shrugged. "She was older than she looks."

The baby whimpered; Kate lost the thread of her questioning for a while. As she stooped and lifted the infant, Drew noticed with relief that the anger in her softened. There was kindness, love even, in her eyes again. She seemed transformed into the old Kate for an instant, the patient, gentle elder sister that he had remembered with a certain fondness. At that moment, he had the feeling that all would be well, that she would do exactly as he had planned. The whining quality went out of his tone. He sensed what he must say and do now.

Rocking the baby gently, Kate said, "When was he fed?"

"A couple of hours ago. I hired a wet nurse. She'll be back early tomorrow morning."

"You've learned a lot in Edinburgh," Kate said. "I can see that."

"No need to be sarcastic, Kate," Drew said. "I had a brief liaison with this girl; that was foolish and stupid. But when she came t'me claiming that the child was mine, when I *knew* that she had had many other . . ."

"It's your baby, Drew, isn't it?" Kate said, then shouted, "*Isn't it?*"

"Yes, it may well be my child."

"Why didn't you marry her, take her t'live with you?"

"Firstly," said Drew, prepared for this line of questioning, "I didn't even know what had become of her. I didn't clap an eye on the bit . . . on her since a while before Christmas. I didn't *know* she was with child. She never approached me. Not a solitary word did I hear from her 'til this afternoon. She sent a woman for me."

"What woman? A relative?"

"No, she has no relatives: none at all. She sent the landlady of this property."

"An' these men she was supposed t'have taken up with in the interim?"

Drew shrugged. "Abandoned her, I suppose."

"But not you? You didn't abandon her?"

"I tell you, Kate, I didn't . . ."

"Where did you get the money t'send special messages?"

"I borrowed it."

"How much?"

"Five guineas, from Havershaw's clerk."

"An' how will you pay him back?"

"I have a job," said Drew. "I'm . . . I'm tutoring a fellow student, Fraser McAlmond. He gives me board and lodgin' free. I save most of my quarterly patronage."

"An' that fine, expensive coat?"

"A gift from Fraser."

"What are y'doin', Drew Stalker? What's happenin' t'you?"

He lost his temper. "I'll tell you what's happenin' t'me. I'm makin' my own way in the world. I'm nobody's charity boy now, Kate. I don't need handouts from bloody Houston Lamont; no nor from any other bastard who happens t'fancy my sister. I'm doin' what I promised my father. I'm doin' what he wanted. I'm climbin' up t'the top of the pyramid, Kate. I'm takin' the opportunity offered t'me. This is a city where I can flourish. An' that's what I've been doin'. I have friends now. Friends who *like* me. Friends who *appreciate* me. Aye, an' friends who'll be useful t'me in future years."

"Drew, I didn't mean . . ."

"Five guineas!" the young man stormed. "When did you ever see five guineas, Kate? Who did you ever know, Lamont excepted, who could dip his hand int' his pocket an' lend five guineas? Aye, an' take a handshake on it's repayment. Trust: a bond between gentlemen."

"An' her, this poor wee lass . . . ?"

"Poor lass, be damned! She got her hooks in me when I was vulnerable," Drew cried. "It didn't take me long t'see how the bloody wind was blowin'."

"So you threw her over?"

"*She left me, I'm tellin' you.*"

"She also left you a son, Drew."

The young man was suddenly silent. The incontrovertible fact of the new-born infant remained. There were other things still to be done, to be swept under the carpet. But they were paper problems. He could cope with them discreetly enough. He already had the Certificate of Death. With that document he could arrange a burial at the borough's expense, the pauper's grave that held so much terror for superstitious fools, that ultimate symbol of rejection, the end of all hope. What the devil did it matter? To Heather Campbell, not one whit. She had nobody to mourn her, anyway, nobody to be ashamed of a public acknowledgment of poverty. If there were such things as immortal souls, Heather Campbell's had long gone to its celestial abode. But the baby, his son; *that* was the problem, the sole reason why he'd had to send for Kate.

He said, "Take it, Kate, take it out of my sight."

It was not a request. The command took the breath from her, shook her. He knew it would: he had banked on that.

"But . . . but he's . . . he's your bairn."

"Probably," said Drew. "But that makes no difference. I want rid of him. He is, to me, a fatal encumbrance. You have a choice, Kate. You may take him back to Blacklaw, or I will put him into a workhouse orphanage."

Instinctively Kate hugged the infant closer to her breast as if she suspected that her brother would attempt to tear it from her and dash away with it there and then to throw into the cold catacombs of the orphanage.

"That, by the way, is where its mother came from," said Drew, with a casualness that drove Kate into a wild rage. If she had not been burdened with the baby, she would have struck him then. Drew smiled.

He had calculated that far, thrown much weight on his sister's innate love for the weak, the helpless, the rejected. Besides, the bastard was a Stalker in blood and the Stalkers were as obsessed with family name, as bad as any highland laird with his pedigree.

He was so aloof, so distant, that Kate's fury seemed to run out before it reached him, like a huge sea which dwindles to passivity before the horizon. It was hard for his sister to see him for what he was, for what they had helped him become. To her he was just a seventeen-year-old boy. But he knew better. He looked older, he acted much older, and they could say that he was precocious if they wished. He was a man now, on his own two steady feet and, if they wanted their own kind of proof, he had fathered a child. He was no longer Kate and Mirrin's 'wee' brother: he was their superior in all ways.

"I need not have sent for you, Kate," he declared. "I want you to understand that. I could have handled this whole situation myself. I could have put that baby into the parish workhouse just as easily as I obtained a Death Certificate for his mother and will have her buried tomorrow or the next day by the parish. But I thought you might prefer . . ."

"I'm ashamed," Kate said. "*Ashamed* that you're my brother."

"You made me, or helped make me. You gave my father a solemn promise, Kate. You swore t'him that you'd see me through university. I'm no longer obligated t'you to do that. I can see myself through university. But I cannot be burdened with a bastard child. I *refuse* to be saddled with . . . with that."

Kate's eyes were closed. The baby was held high against her chest, her lips almost touching its paper-thin crown and the wisps of hair that plastered the tiny skull.

"For the first time in my life, I thank God m'father died when he did." Her voice was hoarse with emotion. "You're not worth one minute of his pain, or of our sacrifice. No matter how high you climb or what you become, or what you make of your life, from this night on *we're finished*."

"But you will take the child?"

"Aye, fine well you know I'll take the child."

"Good," Drew said. "So that's the arrangement, is it? You'll take responsibility for him instead of me."

"It seems all wrong that the best o'men should've died just so the likes of you might live," Kate said, with brutal softness.

"The best of men . . ." Drew began, then prudently checked himself. "Listen, nobody must know that the child is mine. I have a position here in Edinburgh, and . . ."

"When will the nurse come?" Kate interrupted.

"Early, so she said."

"I'll wait elsewhere, then," said Kate. "I'll leave you t'your own designs."

"But . . . ?"

"I dare say I'll find another nurse in the town."

"Kate, I . . ."

Without another word to her brother, Kate Stalker wrapped the sheet more tightly around the baby and, holding him warm inside her coat, walked out of Drew's life.

From the window he watched her go. The dreadful anxiety had left him now. She had removed it. The rest would be a matter of discreet invention and the handling of the parish officials. Now it was almost over. Soon nothing would remain to connect him with the sordid affair. Hector prided himself on seeing further through a brick wall than most people. He must be careful what tale he told Hector to account for his strange behaviour and his absence from classes that coming morning.

Looking round, he saw that there was nothing in the room to occupy him. He would be as well with a bit of a night's sleep in some local dormitory hotel where at least he would have a bed to lie upon and the opportunity of putting a breakfast of sorts in his belly. Kate had not asked him for money. Presumably she had extracted a few shillings from the stone jar. Listlessly now he wondered what his mother would say about the baby. He wondered what sort of fabrications they would make up to appease the rabid curiosity of Blacklaw's gossipmongers.

Perhaps, he thought, as he turned out the oil lamp, they would say it was Mirrin's brat. He snorted with wry amusement. The flame flared brightly for a moment then flickered out and Heather Campbell's serene dead face was swallowed up in the darkness.

Though the train left the capital at the ungodly hour of six a.m., it carried quite a crowd of working men and women. The baby was comfortable enough. Kate had made sure of that. She had thrown herself on the mercy of the hoteliers of Edinburgh, particularly those situated near the railway station. For payment of certain small sums she had acquired from George's Temperance Hotel a late supper for herself and a warm groundfloor room in which she passed the three or four hours of the night that remained. She was then shuttled by the hotel clerk to Simons', a truly hospitable establishment close to the station where, thanks to prior warning by the porter of the Temperance, a wet nurse of impeccable cleanliness was on hand to feed the baby. In Simons', at Kate's request, a selection of small wear and shawls had been assembled from the hotel shopping arcade. She purchased sufficient for the baby's needs, paid her bill and was escorted the three or four hundred yards to the ticket office in ample time to board the Daylight Express, as it was jocularly called by the workers who packed its box-like coaches. It was not until she changed trains at Bathgate and settled into the shabby carriage of the Wilsontown, Morningside and Coltness Special, however, that Kate had the leisure to consider all that had happened and to be stunned, for a while, by the magnitude of the problems that the child would bring.

For all that, with the sun streaming down upon hazy green fields, and the tiny baby lying asleep in his new woollen shawl, Kate experienced a wave of sheer happiness that extinguished the miserable defeatism of the past year.

It was almost exactly a year since Drew had left for Edinburgh and Mirrin had sallied out of Blacklaw to make her own way in the world. Now Drew had broken away completely. Kate meant what she said. She would hold him, no matter how her mother might protest, to that bitter contract. She would answer no more summonses, do no more for him. In fact, she realised that she had obtained the best of that bargain. The baby was hers, and would remain hers as long as she lived. Overnight she had changed her status. Mirrin might be blossoming in some fancy world of theatres and variety halls; Betsy might be the belle of Dalzells' Emporium in Hamilton; Drew, that ruthless blackguard, might be aimed at greatness in the capital of Scotland. But none of that mattered now to Kate. She had no need of her sisters and brother, to live vicariously through their advancements. She had a baby, a baby that was virtually her own. And that was all she wanted.

If possible she would have spared her mother the knowledge of what had happened. The details were sordid and sorrowful. But, Kate knew, Mam too would be delighted to have charge of the baby. He was such a bonny wee thing. She touched back the shawl. The features were perfect. Dark hair was a Stalker trait, the straight nose too — if that comical wee button could be said to be straight. But the mouth was not from the Stalker kist: it favoured his mother, Kate supposed, the poor lost highland girl.

For the second time in her life, Kate made a promise. There was nobody around to hear it, however, only the baby, which was as it should be under the circumstances, since the promise concerned him.

"Aye, we'll love you as our own, an' bring you up t'be a real Stalker," Kate murmured. To her surprise, the infant's eyes opened for a moment almost as if he'd understood.

Before she had reached Hamilton, she had found a suitable name for him: Neill Campbell Stalker. It had a fighting ring to it which seemed just right after such an entry into the harsh world.

Neill Campbell Stalker; the first of the new generation.

Two

THOUGH WALLACE HADN'T seen the big woman for eight days, her absence did not materially affect his creature comfort. He was willing to forgive her neglect and listen patiently to her explanations. He kept his huge head still, his jaws munching slowly over the currant bun she'd brought him, as he scrutinised the bundle that Flora Stalker held up for his approval. The rapport which had developed between horse and widow had become so keen that Wallace realised the importance of the small thing even if he did not comprehend its exact relationship to his mistress.

"My grandson, Wallace," Flora Stalker declared. "He'll be havin' rides on your back before you're much older."

Wallace thought he might manage to carry a jockey of such reduced proportions without strain. He clopped his tongue over his teeth and shook his harness slightly.

Flora said, "Neill Campbell Stalker, this's Wallace. He's a gey coarse chap but y'get used t'him after a while." She smiled at the baby in her arms. "He'll clump along slow an' easy when he's got you in the back of the van. He'll not shoogle your cot. Eh, will you, y'big lump?"

Wallace made an appropriate noise and nuzzled his nose into Flora Stalker's offered left hand. Though he did not find sugar there, he enjoyed the contact and the bullying caress she gave him which, now that he thought of it, he had rather missed during the past week.

Sparrows twittered among the stable's rafters, finished with nest building now but still active with the mating and its results. There was a robin, too, left over from Christmas, though where he had hidden his lady neither Flora nor Wallace had been able to discover.

"How about some straw, then, Wallace?" Flora said. "I'm sure y'can spare a puckle o'straw for wee Neill's basket?"

Wallace indicated that he could.

Holding the baby carefully in the crook of her left arm, Flora brought in a wicker hamper, some twenty inches deep, into which had been sewn a quilted felt lining. Still holding the child, the woman teazed straw from a bale in the corner and painstakingly padded the bottom of the hamper. On top of the straw she laid a plaid rug. On top of the rug she laid the cocoon-like shape of the thing called Neill Campbell Stalker which, even Wallace had realised, was the human equivalent of a nestling.

"M'father's name was Neill, y'know," Flora confided as she fussed over the baby. "That's why our Kate picked it, I'm sure. An' Campbell? Well, that seemed fittin', I suppose, under the circumstances. He's not my first grandchild, though, Wallace. I've another one, Edward. But he lives far from here an' I haven't seen him this long while." With a steel pin in her teeth the stallion could not quite make out the words. Flora said, "But Neill's the first that'll grow up here in Blacklaw. He'll be a right Stalker, will Neill. Won't you, son?"

She fitted the pin into the shawl and patted it, testing the lie of the point with her thumb to ascertain that it would not scratch the baby. The infant remained unconcerned. He had not even been polite enough to open his eyes when introductions were made. For all that, staring down his nose at the wee face almost hidden among the clothing, Wallace was impressed by the gesture of faith that the big woman had shown by bringing such a defenceless creature right into his stall.

At that moment the stable door opened and the master, Willie Kellock, keeked round it. He carried the oval leather collar which he'd taken away to soap the previous evening and which was now as clean and bright as a charger's coronet. Willie's sandy-grey thatch was already powdered with flour and a smut of batter on his chin wagged as he spoke.

"Och, it's yourself, Mrs. Stalker."

"I told you I'd be back today, Mr. Kellock."

"Aye, but I didn't expect you so early."

"We're up with the lark for the baby's feed," said Flora. "Young Mrs. Malone's the wet nurse. She comes over from the farm real early."

"Pleasant folk, the Malones," said Willie, a little embarrassed at this aspect of the unexpected turn of events. He cleared his throat. "I'm delighted that y'feel able t'continue in my service, Mrs. Stalker. I wouldn't have found another hand like you in a hurry, of that I'm sure."

"It's kind o'you t'say so, Mr. Kellock. The wee chap'll not keep me off my work, though I'll need an extra half hour at dinner time t'take him t'the Malones t'be fed; just for three or four months, 'til we wean him properly."

"Quite all right! Quite all right, Mrs. Stalker."

"If, ah . . . if the scandal that might result turns int' a bother an' damages the trade, I'll leave, of course."

"Havers, Mrs. Stalker! If scandal bothered me, I'd no' be resident long in this town, I can tell you. So, no more of that daft talk. Here, let's have a look at this young man."

Setting down Wallace's collar, Willie Kellock bent over the hamper and with a stumpy forefinger parted the shawl to inspect the infant's sleeping features.

"My! But he's perfect. Just perfect!"

"He is that."

Discreetly, Willie Kellock slipped a florin into the tuck of the shawl, the silver hansel that tradition demanded. His interest in and fondness for the bairn were not feigned. But not then and not ever did he enquire as to who Neill's parents might be. Pointed questions directed at him over the counter and in the taproom of the *Lantern*, the baker brusquely brushed aside. It was, he declared, none of his concern. The rest of the colliers and their wives were less reticent in offering solutions to the latest mystery.

"Mirrin Stalker's double. They canny deny it."

"He's like her, right enough. But who's the man?"

"Count on your fingers."

"No' Rob Ewing?"

"Never. He's got his hands full wi' that sick wife o'his."

"Besides, the Stalker bitch's been awa' too long for that."

"How old's the wean?"

"Weeks, at the very most."

"Then it canny be Rob."

"Or Lamont?"

"Houston Lamont? Aye, he packed her off in a hurry."

"But a full year sine."

"True. True."

"Unless he's met up wi' her again since."

"Now there's a suggestion."

"I heard he's hardly left the house."

"Ach, he could've been awa' t'England an' back for all we know. It *could* be Lamont, right enough."

"She's on the stage, so I heard."

"It's a fact. Jean Anderson's youngest, him that's in York now, he sent his Mam a notice wi' Mirrin Stalker's name printed on it."

"Did he see her, though?"

"Not that I know."

"There's a pity."

"How?"

"Well, she could hardly be struntin' on a public stage wi' her belly stickin' out, could she?"

"But this was months ago."

"Tight lacin' can work wonders, I'm told."

"It'll be some rascal actor, like as not."

"Aye. I've heard they've nae morals at all, them folk. Sleep four an' five t'a bed. Strip down in the same room. It's sma' wonder it happened."

"Maybe she's wed."

"*Huh!*"

"I thought . . . well, I thought she'd have had more sense."

"*Huh!*"

"Take a good keek at the bairn next time. You'll see. Mirrin Stalker's spittin' image."

"Aye."

"Mark my words, ladies, she'll turn up here for her bairn sooner or later."

"Acknowledge it, y'mean?"

"She's brazen enough for anythin'."

"Aye, she's all that."

"Unless it's Houston Lamont's?"

"Well, I'll wager it is."

"Then it'll never go hungry."

"Good luck t'it. It's no what I'd want for mine."

"For your what, Georgina?"

"Dirty bitch!"

"It's agreed then, it's Mirrin's bairn."

"Aye."

"There's nobody else it could be, is there?"

"The lad?"

"Drew? Yon skinny wee tyke!"

"Maybe . . . ?"

"Never. He's no' man enough t'blow his nose."

"But . . . ?"

"*Huh!*"

"You're right, ladies. It can only be Mirrin's."

After a time, as the year advanced through summer into autumn, the spate of gossip slackened and young Neill became a favourite of the men and women who patronised Kellock's Good Bread Bakery.

The baby travelled the streets of Blacklaw day in and day out, snug in his hamper on the floor of the van which Wallace had learned to haul with a dedicated patience that would have done a blind pony proud. Speculation, however, never quite died out and the intriguing mystery often provided a topic of conversation in the sly corners of the mining town.

It was a credit to the Stalkers that the identity of Neill's parents remained a close secret and that the smouldering curiosity of certain Blacklaw citizens was never quite extinguished by the truth.

With the opening of a new road and the extended services offered by the Caledonian Railway, the burgh of Hamilton enjoyed a wave of prosperity such as it had not known since its heyday as a centre of bobbinette weaving some fifty years before. New villas and mansions appeared in the straggling suburbs and a number of brand new stores, adjuncts of those which graced Glasgow and Edinburgh, blossomed in the High Street, competing with each other for middle-class accounts by means of startling window displays and other retail gimcracks. Regarding the interlopers with trepidation, the Dalzell brothers, owners of the largest emporium in the whole Middle Ward of Lanarkshire, devised ingenious means of maintaining their premier position.

Corsets, chemises, petticoats and undergarments were whisked from the groundfloor rooms. Ladies' footwear and millinery were similarly dispossessed. Tantalisingly secret renovations were made to the main entrance and foyer. Quantities of walnut wood, mahogany and bevelled glass were carted behind the screens each afternoon to be hammered and chiselled and planed into position during the dark hours of the night. One hundred square feet of crimson carpeting and countless strips of moss-green flock paper vanished behind the joiners' drapes, followed by fine carved mirrors and delicate display stands. At last, the refurbished floor was revealed to the public gaze as a Silver Hall, an Aladdin's cave of choice pieces of silverware, from gigantic tureens down to minute salt spoons. Mr. Gabriel Reeves, an impressively portly gentleman from the upper-class end of Princes Street, Edinburgh, was imported as a consultant in charge of the department and, to nobody's great surprise, Elizabeth Stalker was duly chosen as his assistant.

The promotion was greatly to Betsy's liking. It brought with it not only status and an additional five shillings and sixpence per week, but the bonus of a full rig of expensive, if sombre, clothing, from dainty black leather shoes to a pleated velvet tiara that made her look more mature and, if possible, even more beautiful. In addition, the post gave Betsy the opportunity to encounter a cultured and sophisticated class of customer, some of whom, inevitably, were wealthy males.

The past couple of years had served Betsy well. She had grown out of the stage of being girlishly pretty. She had a similar build to her sister Mirrin, only more compact and refined. Like her twin brother, she copied the airs, graces and accents of the gentry with whom she came in contact. Mr. Gabriel Reeves would not have chosen her as his assistant if any trace of superficial gauchness had remained. Betsy — Elizabeth Stalker, as she was now called — was as polished and fine as much of the silver. With her low, confidential voice and dainty, unsullied hands, she could charm even the Duchess herself when that grand dame visited the department to buy an engraved Christening cup for her latest godchild.

Winning over a woman, even the Duchess, however, was only professional protocol for Miss Elizabeth Stalker. She had many other little tricks of behaviour up her sober sleeve to apply, when necessary, to less august clients, gentlemen in search of plate for investment purposes or a swanky ornament to prop in their dining rooms to advertise their rising fortunes. In dealing with male customers, Betsy's features seemed to become a little less conservative, to assume a pertness of expression and a cultivated little pout that was both appealing and provocative.

Though he was far too reserved ever to remark it aloud, privately Mr. Gabriel Reeves thought of Betsy as his Pocket Venus. If he had not been happily married these twenty-two years and a pillar of St. Mary's Episcopal, he might have been tempted to steal a kiss from her. Certainly there were many gloomy mornings when the young woman's mere appearance spread a ray of sunshine through the gentleman's wistful heart, when her modest smile was warm enough to make him primp his moustaches and study himself speculatively in the gleaming surface of a scalloped salver. Not even Mr. Gabriel Reeves, though, was observant enough to detect the subtle change in Betsy that occurred early in the May month, nor was he sufficiently *au fait* with lower cloakroom gossip to learn that Betsy's family had been blessed with a new arrival. If he had, it's possible that he would have been more wary about introducing his assistant into the home of Randolph Newton, director of the Coalbridge Steel Company, devoted husband, father of three, and a lecher of such cunning and discretion that no whisper of his conquests ever blemished his good name in the parish.

Part of the estimable service that Dalzells' offered was a kind of Grand Show of Affluence, a circus without band and clowns. It was the emporium's policy to take goods to the customer if the status of the client warranted and if a sale seemed certain. Harking back to the high days of competitive trading, the Dalzells had equipped a couple of handsome early-century four-wheeled cabriolets in which such honoured commodities as wine, jewellery, gold and silver wares were transported to private residences to be displayed to best advantage in the natural surroundings of the home. The cabriolets were drawn by identical grey stallions, beautifully groomed and harnessed. Driver and guard, like the store's famous eccentric doorman, Sergeant Walters, were accoutred in Prussian-blue worsted, astrakhan hats and streaming silk scarves. Each load of treasure was accompanied by an 'expert', and an assistant who fussed over the cargo, carried in long black-lacquered boxes, like undertakers with a royal cadaver. The wine-tasting formalities were not altogether successful, as M. Duroc had the unfortunate habit of being carried away by the quality of his product during demonstrations and winding up prone on the carpet side by side with his appreciative customer. Mr. Aymer, goldsmith and jewellery expert and, of course, Mr. Reeves and his decorous assistant, saw to it that no such mishaps spoiled their jaunts to the mansions of the rich, and, indeed, reaped such bountiful rewards for the owners that Dalzells had another carriage on order to extend the service into gowns and millinery.

Betsy Stalker enjoyed her forays into the drawing rooms of the county's aristocrats. She was realistic enough, however, to set her sights on the bourgeoisie, in whose smaller establishments the origins of money had not been lost in the kind of heritage that would for ever debar a girl of her class.

In all this, at first, there was a serious element of play. Betsy wanted only one thing out of life at that stage in her career and everything else was but part of her plan to achieve it. She wanted the fulfilment of the promise that Drew had given her that he would send for her soon and introduce her into Edinburgh society. Always, even in the most resplendent of homes, Betsy sustained a faintly derisive attitude as she compared the provincial environment to her gilded vision of society in the capital.

It was the fabric of this daydream that had been ripped and abruptly torn apart by the arrival of Drew's bastard son. She could not believe that her brother would be so stupid as to father a child on a servant wench, some dirty wee orphan who had probably marked him out as an easy target. A corner of her awe in respect of Drew's precocious intelligence was knocked away by Kate's restrained explanation of how the baby came into the narrow house and why it must now be regarded as their responsibility.

For Betsy, Neill Campbell Stalker was a symbol of disillusionment, ever present, undeniable and at times disturbingly voluble. Much of her shock stemmed from a realisation that if Drew had been trapped into indiscretion once it might happen a second time and that, on the next occasion, without Kate's aid he might well find his career in ruins. In addition, Betsy was piqued by the adulation that her Mam and Kate lavished on the infant. Clearly she was no longer capable of winning their attention and her one short outburst of hysterics had gone almost unremarked. At a stroke, the skinny wee thing in the wicker hamper had usurped her as the baby of the family.

Out of necessity she became more self-reliant. Within the narrow house her behaviour was demure and courteous, though she firmly refused to have anything at all to do with her nephew's welfare. Belatedly she began to cultivate the habits that Drew had demonstrated. She spent more time alone in her room, not sulking exactly but mulling over the tide in affairs that had carried her further from the golden horizon of Edinburgh. It had become a matter of some urgency now. She must embark for the capital as soon as proved practical. Like Drew, she must make circumstances bow to her will, not merely depend on others, upon a gradual drift towards fulfilment. She must, as it were, stop daydreaming and begin planning. In a sense, she was ready to meet the challenge. The answer to her problems was money. And the answer to the money problem lay in Mr. Randolph Newton.

She was quite aware what Mr. Randolph Newton wanted from her and what he would give in return. There was no question of 'making a catch'. Newton had been discreetly explicit in his approach.

She remembered that March afternoon, the wind flittering the leaves, all brown and shrivelled, along the flagstones of the carriage yard, and how Newton had come forward out of the kitchen door of the big house in Bothwell Avenue in the village of Gleddan in the open farm country south of Hamilton. He was dark and tall and handsome, like the heroes of the novels she'd read, but he was also calculating and ruthless in a manner that was not make-believe. She sensed the power in him at once, an animal quality that marked him as different from most of the other gentlemen she'd encountered where sensuality was disguised with flippancy or foolishness or adulterated by nervous guilt. There was no check in Newton, no hint that he would deny himself any pleasure which could be bought or coaxed from any girl or woman that attracted him. She wondered if he had an instinct for selecting girls who were not only beautiful but ripe for the plucking. Grandiosely she thought of herself in those terms.

Throughout March and April, during and after Mr. Newton's transactions with Dalzells' silverware department — he purchased four hundred pounds' worth of beautiful hand-made silver work and left Mr. Reeves with a commission to scout for early Georgian authentics — Betsy gave no more than token encouragement to the rake. She acknowledged that he was a rake. In spite of his impeccable reputation and lack of hard gossip about him in the emporium, Betsy was under no illusions as to Newton's purpose with her.

There was nothing clandestine in their meetings. Newton came openly to the magnificent Silver Hall on Dalzells' groundfloor, browsed among the displays of tureens and gravy-holders and tobacco boxes, lifted and inspected and laid down the casters, quaichs and epergnes and conversed with the attendant assistant, Miss Stalker, in muted tones about the items and, between commonplaces, about the possible purchase of her virginity.

Callously regarded, Betsy had to admit that Randolph Newton's frankness was refreshingly honest. Seduction was no boys' game to him. He wanted her for the pleasure it would give him.

Betsy would not have dared to give Newton anything but casual encouragement if it had not been for the unexpected events in Edinburgh and the arrival in Blacklaw of Drew's bastard child. It took Betsy a fortnight to steel herself to proceed. Naturally, she was afraid of Newton, of having any man enter her body. On the other hand she realised that logically no harm would accrue from such an action, provided Newton took precautions, which she was sure he would do. She knew also that he would treat her well and, being vain still, imagined that he might even become so infatuated with her that he would throw up home and family and flee with her to Edinburgh or, more probably, London. That last factor was a sop to her dreams, the romantic, silly echo of the girl she'd been back in '75.

The Treasury-type inkstand was laid on a pad of green baize. The lapis-lazuli-coloured pots contrasted beautifully with the smooth polished silver and its plainness, unlike much of the New Art that Gabriel Reeves stocked because fashion demanded it, increased its appeal. Betsy could tell at once that Randolph Newton was interested. He lifted the object carefully and, stooping a little, examined the base, linings and hinges against the gas-light. Though a strong early summer sun shone down through the pebble-glass roof, gas mantels purred all day long in the Silver Hall.

Newton wore a light-weight blue-diagonal business suit which showed the breadth of his chest and torso. His hands, Betsy noticed, were slender, out of kilter with the rest of him, fine, long-fingered hands. She tried to imagine them touching her. The very thought made her shiver a little, not with revulsion but in a kind of dreadful anticipation. Moving only his eyes, Randolph Newton glanced speculatively past the flange of the inkstand. He placed the piece gently on the baize again.

It was quiet in the Silver Hall. Mr. Reeves had gone up to the third floor to take coffee with the other heads of departments. Only in the region of the stair were there signs of activity.

Betsy felt sick with dread, not fear of Newton so much as dread of commitment, anxiety lest she make a fool of herself and seem bold rather than direct, scheming rather than practical.

"A choice item," Newton said. "There are several desirable items in Dalzells'. One cannot have them all, Miss Stalker."

"One can," said Betsy, "if . . . if one is willing to pay the price."

"Price?"

"Oh, yes, everything here has a price label on it."

"But not on show?"

"That would not be discreet."

"Everything, you say?"

"Yes, sir: everything."

A less experienced philanderer would have pushed the conversation to its limit. Newton resisted. Instead, he tapped the inkstand with his finger. "I will have this."

"Yes, sir."

"On the account, please."

"Yes, sir. Is that all you wish to have?"

Newton's eyes were particularly hot as he studied the girl. "Is there something else that might interest me on offer?"

"There may be, sir," said Betsy. She knew that she was beginning to blush. She forced herself to meet his eye.

"It would be better displayed in privacy, sir."

Newton hesitated, then said, "Would it now?"

"I would personally . . . bring . . ."

"Is the night of the day after tomorrow suitable?"

"Yes."

"If you come to College Station on the eight-ten train, I will arrange to meet you: College Station, Glasgow."

"That is . . . convenient, Mr. Newton."

"You will come alone?"

"Of course."

"College Station, Thursday, at a quarter of nine."

"You haven't enquired about the . . . the price, sir?"

"I will pay the price," said Randolph Newton. "Be assured of that."

"Very well. I'll . . . I'll be there."

"Good day to you, Miss Stalker."

"Good day to you, Mr. Newton."

It was not the custom for women to attend the graveside, though colliers were less attached to that tradition than middle-class folk. Edith Lamont was heartily thankful that *she* was not called upon to trail fourteen miles in an open conveyance on that hot June day, dressed in frumpish weeds and perspiring beneath a veil. It was bad enough to have to dredge up vestiges of sentiment, squeeze out sympathetic tears when she really felt like waltzing around the parlour with Anna Thrush, the bearer of the sad tidings.

Decorum, however, and hypocrisy will out, and plump little Edith set up a lamentation which, though it did not penetrate Houston's numb anguish, certainly impressed the servants. The truth was that Edith had disliked Dorothy Lamont to the point of hatred. Her sole cause for regret at the woman's passing was that she would lose an edge over her husband. Dorothy's presence had anchored Houston. She, Edith, was not sure how he might react now that his beloved sister had passed to her Maker.

To Edith's surprise, Houston quickly gathered himself from the depths of grief. He took himself to his sister's room, alone, for half an hour, after doctors and undertakers had done their grisly work, and emerged ravaged but in full control of himself.

There was no reason for Dorothy Lamont to chose that beautiful sun-filled June day on which to die. The gardens were brimming with flowers, the sky placid. The woman couldn't possibly have succumbed to despair. Though she had not been active of late and had slipped ever deeper into her distant introverted state, Dorothy Lamont's physical health — so Edith had been led to believe — was much more sound than her mind. Nonetheless, Dorothy Lamont had died during the course of that early morning, her head raised upon the pillow, her gaunt face turned towards the barred window, her wide open eyes staring at a spray of new-budded leaves that sprang up from the tree below, and, so Houston had once said, seemed to tap, tap upon the pane as if to lure Dorothy from captivity.

Edith's suggestion, made in the best possible spirit, that Sydney Thrush be permitted to take the burden of the funeral arrangements from Houston's care-stooped shoulders was brushed aside. Her husband was brisk, business-like. Edith wondered if he too experienced more relief than loss at being freed from the burden of a mad relative, even one so cherished as his sister. But Edith did not know her husband well enough to read into his efficiency its proper meaning.

In the hours following Dorothy's death and in preparations for interment in the family plot in Glenloch cemetry on the outskirts of Glasgow, Houston was again the strong brother, the man of certain decision that Dorothy had always considered him to be. If he had been a musician, he might have composed a hymn in her memory; if he had been a poet he would have penned an epitaph: but Houston Lamont was a coalmaster and could do no more in his dearest's honour than hold himself together and put her to rest with all the ceremony and decency that society expected.

A March death, in the dumb days before seeding, in the cold scouring hours of the morning; a November death, in the dank brown fogs of the central valley or the hard-baked salt-white frosts of the hills, such seasonal phases would have been more fitting. But Dorothy had slipped out of life in the full blossom of June with summer on the brink of fulfilment. It was as if, at last, her grip on the joy of living had slackened, as if, with merciless clarity, she had viewed her own situation and, in defeat, retreated back into the sleep of childhood, the sound, deep sleep of untarnished innocence.

Houston did it all. He ordered — and paid for — the shell lead coffin, outside case, hearse and four horses, the single coach and pair, with plumes and full equipment of superior description. He ordered — and paid for — a simple polished monument of Aberdeen granite, chose the lettering and form of the inscription and the little addendum which, by the addition of a simple word, seemed to coax a peculiar poignancy from the standard phrase. On completion, it would read *Rest, Rest in Peace.* Cliché had become blessing, the last heartfelt wish of a brother for a sister upon whom he had bestowed so little and from whom he had received so much.

It was not only the memorial that had an element of eccentricity. The funeral, too, though a model of propriety in its trappings,was rendered somehow sinister in its execution. Houston would brook no argument: a short service was held in the dining room of the mansion. Only Houston, Edith and Donald Wyld were present, Anna and Sydney Thrush having received no invitation. The minister, the Reverend William Heath from Hamilton high kirk, was instructed on which hymn to announce, which reading to select and what the tone of his formal eulogy must be. Afterwards Houston and he, quite alone, followed the coffin out to the hearse and took their places side by side on the long padded leather bench of the open landau.

They watched as the coffin was laid on a huge foaming mass of early summer blossoms whose cutting had denuded the garden completely. Then the attenuated procession left, moving with dignity down the driveway towards the gates, the great black horses trained to trot at a suitable pace, dyed black feathers nodding and bobbing, the wheels of the sombre carriage crunching on the gravel. The flowers buoyed up the coffin, cushioning it, a gay untidy mass without a wreath in sight. A petal or two spilled upon the verge as the hearse swayed at the curve.

In the landau Houston Lamont sat erect and silent in black mourning, his tall polished hat upon his knee, his face to the front, looking into the sun over the oak trees and its brassy glitter on the coffin ornaments. The Reverend William Heath had sufficient sense to keep his platitudes to himself. During the long drive down through the oaks and south-west along the ridge route towards Glenloch, he said nothing. He had no comfort to offer.

At noon, under a blazing sun, the interment service was duly read and Dorothy Lamont's mortal body lowered into the sweet earth. Houston crumpled earth on to the satin smooth lid.

Blackbirds were trilling in the hawthorns round the old wall, and chaffinchs flocked excitedly in tangled whins.

The wrought-iron railings would not keep Dorothy in; nor would she seek company, Houston thought, from the other Lamonts who lay around — unless, perhaps, from his son, from Gordon, who had also loved the birds and trees and the fragrance of flowers. If there is companionship in the grave, Houston told himself, then they will be happy together, my sister and my little son here on the hill of Glenloch.

But he feared that death, like life, might be a lonely business and, broken, turned away.

Modesty, Betsy Stalker discovered, could not easily be dispensed with. Vain though she was, she could not for the life of her allow Randolph to gaze upon her unclad body. In the attention he paid to her welfare, in his concern for her comfort was a show of gentleness that the girl found surprising. It was not until their relationship had matured that she realised that Randolph had merely exercised restraint to avoid scaring her off or throwing her into hysterics, disasters which, he ruefully confessed, had happened before.

As to love-making, Betsy found that there was not a very great deal to be said either for or against it. Only the anticipation of pain, humiliation and guilt, which her 'education' had led her to expect, marred the evening. But once she was alone with him in the two-room suite in the big sandstone hotel, the *Alfric*, all was well. Curiosity soon overcame her inhibitions. Randolph did not complain at her initial skittishness or the fact that she wept a little and blushed and generally behaved like a lamb going to the slaughter.

Beforehand Newton provided wine. Afterwards a supper of cold roast beef and chicken breasts appeared as if by magic, together with more wine and spirits. He had even brought her a gift, an expensive oriental robe, a piece of foresight that pleased Betsy enormously. As she ate supper by candlelight in the private room in the posh Glasgow hotel, Betsy felt that she had at last stepped close to her goal, albeit by an outrageous route.

Randolph too wore a robe. It was not unlike the maroon velvet Breakfast Jacket that she had goggled at during her early days in

Dalzells' and had imaginatively tried to fill with the form of a 'suitably handsome beau'. Now she knew what sort of a man such a garment was really designed for. But it didn't ruffle her conscience at all that she was involved in an illicit relationship with just such a person. She had little reason to suppose that her liaison would be discovered. She had told Mam and Kate that she was going to the Moody and Sankey Evangelical Meeting in the Candleriggs Hall in company with other girls from Dalzells' and would stay overnight with one of them in Hamilton. Mam and Kate were too concerned with feeding and dressing the baby to pay much attention. It would teach them — yes, and that fool Drew — a lesson.

"I must be back in Dalzells' by eight-thirty tomorrow."

"The cab will take you to the seven-forty train," Randolph promised. He forked a slice of beef into his mouth and chewed it with rapacity. "That comfortably leaves us the rest of the night."

Now that her fundamental anxiety had been calmed, she was more curious than ever. It was clear that Randolph Newton intended to have his moneysworth from her, but also that he was no brute and would not hurt her or so far forget himself in passion as to lose patience with a beginner.

"Aren't you tired?" Betsy asked.

"Not in the least," said Randolph.

When he laughed, she noticed, his eyes showed no warmth. For all that, he was handsome. He had a very broad chest, not coarse like that of a collier. After he had risen from her side he had washed himself and put on his robe. Betsy had watched him, peeping from between the sheets. He performed the toilet with remarkable care, rubbing oil into his chest and dressing his hair with an expensive macassar preparation.

Supper had been waiting in the parlour of the suite. So far, Betsy had seen and been seen only by the cabby commissioned to pick her up at College Station, and by the hotel clerk who had shown her to *Room Three-Two-Ohah* and who, beyond that monosyllabic utterance, gave every sign of being not only dumb but blind and deaf as well. Obviously Room 320 was frequently reserved for the exclusive use of Mr. Newton, part of his grand strategy for undetected sport involving the seduction of women. Small wonder that Randolph's reputation in the Middle Ward emained unblemished; he went to a great deal of trouble and xpense to protect it.

Betsy was not in the least uneasy. In this private chamber, she ealised, they were almost equals, or would be as soon as she ecame a bit less gauche in love-making. Names that might be urled at her by Blacklaw's pious frumps were invalid. They ould not be expected to understand. The commercial nature of he transaction actually protected her. At least she hadn't lost her ead and her heart to some grubby collier, deluded by his pronises and the urging of the villagers into supposing that life pliced was better than life single.

Seated in that candlelit room with a man who had just become er lover and would soon become her benefactor, Betsy appreciated ome of Drew's more sterling qualities and saw herself, at long last, eginning to catch up with her brother.

Betsy drank wine from an elegant glass. The wine was very cold nd fizzy and she adored the taste. The last traces of apprehension egan to thaw and, shifting her position a little, she allowed the eck of the *orientale* to fall open a little.

"You," said Randolph, "are a born *coquette*. D'you know what hat is?"

"Yes, sir," said Betsy, mischievously. "French for a tease."

Randolph leaned his elbows on the table. He studied her for ome moments. Betsy did not flinch from his scrutiny. She forced erself to watch him as he devoured her with his gaze.

"God, but you're pretty," Randolph said.

"Thank you."

"You're not even ashamed of yourself, are you?"

"Why . . . why should I be?"

"A young thing of seventeen."

"I've seen girls married and bairned younger than me."

"I'll wager you have," said Randolph. "And thought them tupid, unless I'm mistaken."

"Right," said Betsy. "And thought them stupid."

The man smiled. He inched his chair closer to the table and noved the candlestick to one side so that he could reach out ffortlessly and stroke her hair.

"Never," he said, "have I encountered a shop-girl so willing o indulge me."

"An' be indulged," said Betsy. "But don't call me a shop-girl, Randolph. That *is* an insult."

"Oh-ho: pretensions, I see."

"I admit it."

"Is that why you . . . ?" He gestured towards the bed.

"Yes."

"I flattered myself that you were hypnotised by me."

Betsy smiled. "You're not ugly."

"I also think you were a little fortunate," Randolph said. "If you had chosen another type of man you might have regretted it."

"But," said Betsy, "I would not have done it then."

"So it *was* me?"

"In a way."

Randolph sat back. "You've a devil of a lot to learn."

"You'll teach me, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, Betsy, I'll teach you."

"Other than instruction," said Betsy, "an' free beef an' wine, what will our arrangement be?"

Randolph winced. "Ouch!" he said. "You *are* a callous young lady."

"I think that suits, doesn't it?"

"It does: it does," Randolph assured her. "Sentimental entanglements are the bane of my existence. I question if you'll lose your head."

"How often will you see me?"

"As often as I possibly can."

"Here?"

"Usually."

"I'll need to find some decent excuses for stayin' out all night," said Betsy. "I'm still living at home."

"I can't help that," the man snapped.

Startled, Betsy took a moment to understand. She said, "I wasn't hinting or anything, Randolph. It suits me fine to stay at home for a while longer. I'm not . . . not demanding special treatment. I've heard about certain clutchin' women an' I'm not inclined to that style, not in the least."

"I must be cautious," said Randolph.

"In case your wife finds out?"

"I . . . I am not unhappy with my wife, you know."

Betsy shrugged. She had no interest in Randolph Newton's motives for conducting affairs. She said, "I'll do what you want, an' what you tell me to, but you must bear in mind that I'm as anxious as you are to protect my reputation. I'm not keen to be disgraced."

Randolph threw himself back in the chair once more, laughing loudly. This time there was warmth in his eyes, a genuine amusement. "How can you talk of disgrace, sitting there in that . . . that silk thing showing off your . . . your breasts?"

"*You* don't think it's disgraceful," Betsy retorted.

"Of course I do. I'm a typical prude, young lady," said Randolph, wiping his eyes with his napkin. "I'll tell you this, if I had freedom and opportunity I would teach you everything. I mean, it would be a pleasure to make the Sunday promenade round the Kibble Palace with you on my arm. To take you into the Argyll Club, or the North Georgian for dinner. It would be fun to dress you and pamper you and . . ."

"It's not possible," said Betsy, shaking her head.

"What *do* you want?"

"Enough to take me to Edinburgh in style."

"Edinburgh: the seat of the mighty!" said Randolph. "You will do well there, Betsy. Is that all you want from me, the means of leaving me?"

"I don't want t'go on living in Lanarkshire. I don't want to marry a clerk and live in Hamilton."

"Even your ambition has a rabidly promiscuous quality," said Randolph. "Why don't you head for London?"

"I have a brother in Edinburgh. I want to join him."

"What does he do?"

"He's in process of becoming a lawyer."

"And, if he's anything like you, he'll probably go to the top of his profession."

"I'm not like him. I wish I was, in a way," said Betsy. "He studied and swotted his way out of Blacklaw. My other sister, she just walked out with the clothes on her back and not much else."

"But that wasn't the way for you?"

"No."

"You intend to be a first-class traveller."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing: it depends how you do it."

"What other means do I have?" Suddenly, oddly, she felt like weeping. Fighting back tears, she said, "I know I'm pretty and that men all . . . all fancy me, so . . ."

"Now don't cry," said Randolph. "Please, don't cry. I can't abide women who cry. I thought you were strong."

"I am. I am."

Without haste or flurry, he rose from his seat, came round the table and put his arms about her, drawing her face down to his chest. She could smell the faint musky odour of the oil he had rubbed into his skin. He did not hurry her, allowing her two or three minutes of comforting contact, during which time her mood changed, and her qualms of self-pity altered into an unfamiliar physical need. His hand stroked her hair and then, sliding down the shoulder of the robe, settled upon her breast. She drew back. But he held her. He held her until the first faint response grew from a nuzzling need for comforting into something quite different and then, drawing her up, he kissed her on the mouth.

It was not as simple now. The arrangement was not without complications. She wanted to cry out, to ask him what was happening to her. But she could not release him or resist his petting. It was, she thought, the most utterly selfish experience of her life.

As he coaxed her gently towards the bed, Randolph Newton said, "Edinburgh it will be, Betsy, I promise you as much."

But at that moment Betsy Stalker did not care.

Three

ALL THREE WERE dressed in dark mourning as befitted friends and relatives of the deceased, though the Thrushes could hardly have been called friends of Dorothy Lamont and Edith, though a relative, had shed no more than a dutiful tear. In fact, Anna and Sydney wore funeral clothing most of the time and of late Edith had taken to selecting black as a suitably fashionable contrast for the orders that went out to Dalzells' every month or so. The heavyweight suiting was not consistent with the brilliance of the weather, but it did lend a certain gravity to the conversation of the trio who were seated around the hearth-screen sipping tea and nibbling on the pastries that Anna had had baked that morning to appease her dear brother's sweet tooth.

"And how is the coalmaster?" asked Sydney Thrush.

"I have hardly seen him," said Edith.

"Is he drinking?" asked Sydney, forthrightly.

"Heavily," said Anna, whose job it was to replenish the decanters in the study. "Almost a full bottle of spirits each day."

"Slow poison," said Thrush, biting into a custard bun.

"I fear," said Edith, "that it may not be so slow, Sydney."

"I take it, ma'am, that your husband is too bereft to be of sound judgment; I mean, capable of decision."

"Without question."

"I require," said Sydney, "authority."

"You have authority, Sydney," said Edith. "All documents will be signed by me during my husband's . . . indisposition. He cannot complain. After all it was by my efforts that we acquired the capital to begin our programme of expansion."

Anna decanted tea from the silver pot for her brother and her mistress. Edith sighed contentedly. Propped on an embroidery frame close to her left hand were sheaves of Thrush reports, detailed records of the changes that he had made in the organisation and running of the colliery and, more importantly, the resulting figures which showed a gradual increase in monthly profits.

"I do not require signature of a document," said Thrush. "I require guidance on a matter of policy, that is all."

"Where is your report, then, Sydney?" asked Edith.

"I deemed it best not to commit any of this to paper."

"It sounds sinister."

"Not at all sinister, ma'am. But certainly serious."

"Militant action, Sydney, is it not?" said Anna.

"In hot weather tempers come quickly to the boil," Sydney Thrush said. "I have been expecting certain loutish elements to cause trouble. I believe that they will do so this very day."

"My husband *should* be informed," said Edith, dubiously.

"I question if that is necessary," said Sydney. "May I stress, ma'am, that I have not done badly by Mr. Lamont's colliery so far and that, at the risk of seeming immodest, my suggestions and their implementation have pulled us — you — out of the red and firmly into the black."

"But militant action on the part of the miners?" said Edith, who was not in the least perturbed. She revelled in the drawing room dramas that went with being a motivating force in the community. "Is that not dangerous?"

The account books told a very pleasant story, the more so when pits and mines all over Scotland were sinking into bankruptcy and men were being flung into the fields and the whole state of the market was as shaky as a barque on a stormy sea. Lamont's books, however, were in order, sales assured, thanks to Sydney Thrush's original proposals for expansion and mechanisation. It did not matter in the least to Edith that a pall of gloom and misery hung over the streets of the little township or that Sydney Thrush had made himself vastly unpopular by his cracking of the whip. Her privately expressed opinion was that Houston had always been far too soft with his work-force, and had spoiled them almost beyond redemption.

Redundancies had become the order of the day. Men unable to neet the increased demands for a higher daily 'darg' were sacked, long with hot-headed rabble-rousers, militants unwise enough to elieve in free speech whose names had been noted in Thrush's wee black book'. Informers and spies were legion in the pit now, Thrush's men, shifty-eyed sycophants who 'cliped' on their mates o ensure their own continued employment. Even at the face-seams nen hardly dared open their mouths in case they spilled a natural grouse or two that could be interpreted as rebellion and carried up op by a sneaky Thrushite.

With the sacking of breadwinners, evictions followed. Families who had thought themselves secure found themselves in he gutter, their windows boarded up and the long iron keys being urned in the locks by hands other than their own. Deputations treamed to Donald Wyld. But it was obvious that his power had vaned in the months since Christmas and that he could, or would, lo nothing. "Go back to your jobs. For your own sakes, I beg you o go quietly back to work."

"For our own sakes!"

"Who the hell is the bloody manager round here: you're Thrush?"

"I am."

"Then do something."

"Blacklaw's still open, isn't it? We're still producing coal. What nore do you want?"

"A square deal. More profit for him; more work for us."

"It doesn't work that way, and well you know it."

"We're bein' squeezed."

"Times *are* hard."

"Christ, Wyld, you're as bad as Thrush, gettin'."

"I'll put your case."

"You've said that before, an' nothin' done about it."

"Listen, I . . ."

"An' where's the bonny boy himsel': where's Lamont?"

"Mr. Lamont is . . ."

"We know where he is: he's bloody hidin'."

"Control yourselves, for God's sake. Look there, behind you. In the window of the office."

"Thrush!"

"Need I say more?"

"Spyin' on us."

"I'll do what I can, I promise."

"Bastard!"

"I will: I'll do what I can."

On Friday of that particular week, seven of the fourteen men who had sued Donald Wyld for a hearing were paid off. The remainder, though they raged and ranted in private were prudent enough to make no more 'official' approaches to any member of the staff and kept very quiet indeed about the pit and worked like demons to make amends.

The best of them were gone, the best of the remainder silenced. The incontestable fact was that they could not risk being paid off. Thrush, as more intelligent colliers realised, *had* saved the pit by his ruthlessness.

The Ewings, the Pritchards and the Ormonds had long ago learned to sing dumb. They were good workers and kept their mouths shut. Even in the security of their own homes, they did not complain about extra duties and reduced pay. At least they *were* paid, which was more than could be said for their brothers in Fife and Clackmannan who had been locked out altogether for six months. That lock-out had suited the coalmasters just fine. The shipbuilding strike was at its height and the iron furnaces were damped down, and who the hell wanted coal anyway? Thrush might be sleekit and vile but he displayed the same attributes at both ends of the scale. He had wheedled markets for Blacklaw's coal in places that no owner had ever contemplated as possible and, so it was said, had even signed a contract with Africa, though what the blacks wanted with Scottish coal God alone could tell. Out in the wide world, there were bank failures, deductions and closures, 'wee darg' policies so severe that men were willing to break their backs for a mere shilling a day. None of that had really come to Blacklaw yet and there were colliers sane enough, and selfish enough, to realise it. Nor was there a 'truck' system: never had been. But Thrush devised other ways to keep the miners of Blacklaw 'humble' and the hutches full.

Edith Lamont said, "What do you advise, Sydney?"

"I have taken certain precautions on my own account."

"How efficient of you!" said Edith, admiringly. Anna, as if handing out a prize, passed the salver of sticky pastries affectionately to her brother.

Sydney helped himself. He ate without fluster, dabbing jam from his lips with his napkin. He felt quite at home in the mansion drawing room and enjoyed unveiling his strategy to Edith, a lady for whom he had much admiration.

He said, "I have this very afternoon agreed to meet with the colliers in the main yard and to answer their questions."

"Talk with the workers?" said Edith, as if such a suggestion was radical in the extreme. "You'll be permitting them a Union next, Sydney?"

"The Union is disintegrating," said Sydney. "Macdonald and his gang are being ignored, reviled. But it is not the Union that's the problem. Two men died this month in the new breach in Pit No. 2."

"Ah, yes, a sad thing," said Anna. "The price of coal."

"I imagine that will be a focal point of dissension," said Thrush, confidently. "The majority have now accepted termination of the checkweigh system of payment. They have accepted the breaching of the new section under, I admit, difficult conditions, and they have recognised if not openly admitted that reductions and redundancies are unavoidable. But accidents have an odd effect on colliers. They will blame the management."

"And?" said Edith.

"In two weeks' time," said Thrush, "I . . . we . . . will be required to implement the present work force by bringing in experienced miners, forty of them, to operate the new machinery. I cannot afford to risk damaging such expensive equipment, nor can I — we — afford to train men in its use. The pick and shovel brigade will be sure to rebel. They have seen the machinery arrive, have watched some of it being installed. They must be aware what it will mean. Between the accident and the so-called threat of modernisation they will have worked themselves into a dangerous mood."

"We cannot allow the louts to hinder progress, Sydney," Edith said.

"Certainly not, madam."

"What do you propose?"

Thrush paused. He glanced behind him, then leaned a little forward. "With your permission, I propose to start a riot."

"To *start* a riot?" Edith's eyes were round with astonishment, her lips pursed in bemusement.

"Bite the biter," Anna said, "before he bites you."

"Precisely, dearest," Sydney Thrush said.

"I begin to understand," Edith said, frowning now. "My husband would certainly not approve."

"Your husband need never know."

"What a suggestion!" Edith exclaimed.

"It will work, ma'am. I assure you," Anna said, "that Sydney is correct."

"What do you say, Mrs. Lamont?" Sydney asked.

Edith folded her hands on her lap and shifted on to the edge of her chair. It was her tangible demonstration of decision-making. She could barely suppress her smile as the implications of Thrush's proposal dawned on her.

At length she looked round at her housekeeper. "Anna, will you be good enough to take my husband another bottle to refresh him throughout the afternoon."

In the crowd of over a hundred off-shift miners, the eight hirelings from Slamannan went undetected. Two were tall enough to be conspicuous but they kept their faces hidden under peaked caps. The other six were ordinary mortals and merged discreetly into the orderly phalanx of demonstrators which collected in the main yard and, led by a rank of old stagers, tramped doggedly round the gangers' shed, past the tipping shutes, where the women paused to watch, and into the area of sun-baked dirt flanked by the latrines, the hutch-sidings and the managers' offices.

On the office porch, leaning against the wooden railing like naval officers on a poop deck, the gaffers waited nervously. Inglis and Jock Baird were there, and fat pompous Davy Dunlop who had swiftly shifted his allegiance from Wyld to Thrush when he'd spotted how the wind was blowing. Donald Wyld was there too, of course, standing to the left of Thrush who, of all the managerial staff, viewed the assembling workers not merely impassively but benignly. His thin Indian-ink eyebrows were raised high as if the intrusion into his afternoon's schedule had come as a welcome surprise.

The crowd was curious, not noisy. There was no evidence of simmering violence, no pick-handles, stones, mallets or angle-irons, no visible signs of aggression. The sun, dusty now and entangled in the superstructure of the winding towers, beat down gently on the heads of the men below, making them sweat a little in their heavy pit clothes.

Furtive discussions had singled out four spokesmen, not the most radical among the available hands but articulate, rational men, men who could be dispensed with if that was how Thrush chose to take his revenge; older men and ailing, like Callum Ewing.

At first Callum had refused to take any active part in the demonstration. But he had been pressed into it. He could not deny that he was close to the end of his working life. By November or December he would surely be forced to quit and rely on his son for charity. Rob, to whom a job was all-important, kept far back in the crowd, in the rear rank with young Ormond, the Pritchard brothers and Dave Henderson. Away to their left, the women had moved out from the troughs. The hutch-tippers and the sorters, Kate Stalker among them, stood watching mutely, straining to hear the parly that would affect them all.

The colliers formed a crescent before the office porch, twenty men abreast, Callum Ewing, Abe Fordyce, Gavin Armstrong and Peter McLean in the centre, protected by their brothers. Thrush's smile and the long, long pause he allowed them to settle and fall still before he spoke were ominous.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen."

The politeness of his greeting disconcerted them further. There were a few murmurs of equally polite response, jumbled on the tongues.

Another pause: Thrush smiling: Thrush glancing at Wyld: Wyld sucking in his breath, and Wyld saying, "I take it that you have representation? Spokesmen?"

"Aye, we have that, sir," Abe Fordyce answered crisply.

Abe was dying. He would be dead before next spring. He had nothing to lose now to Lamont or his cohorts, nothing to relinquish except his dignity, a quality he had protected through all the dismal humiliations of life in this town and at the coal seams deep underground. His features were wrinkled with the disease that was eating him up. The flesh hung in comical pockets on the bones that had taken such a battering over the past forty years. He was a year short of fifty, Abe Fordyce, but he would have passed muster in a pageant of Methuselahs.

Donald Wyld wiped his forehead with his wrist. "What is it that you want?"

"Answers, Mr. Wyld?" Abe said.

"I can give answers," Wyld said. "Promises, though, are a different matter."

"We had hoped to speak wi' Mr. Lamont in person."

"Mr. Lamont suffered a recent bereavement," Wyld said.

Abe nodded. Everyone in Blacklaw knew that the daftie had died. It was difficult for them to feel any sympathy for Lamont.

Thrush intervened. "Mr. Wyld and I are empowered to speak for Mr. Lamont."

"Aye, but who carries the can?" growled an anonymous voice from the second row of scowling faces.

"Can?" asked Thrush, his sharp ears having picked up the jibe. "There's no 'can' to carry anywhere, gentlemen. We are all at the mercy of the market, as I'm sure Mr. Wyld has explained to you many times in recent months."

"If the market's so damned bad, Mr. Thrush," put in Peter McLean, "then why is it that Blacklaw's gearin' itself t'produce more coal than ever before?"

"Because," Thrush answered, "we have markets that other collieries don't have: markets that the management have found for you."

"But the wage rate continues to drop," somebody called out.

"The wage rate is related not to production but to the cost of the coal to the buyer," Thrush explained, apparently warming to his theme. "We can sell all the coal we can produce, but only at a low price."

"So *you* say."

"Any man in this pit may check the accounts for himself," Thrush declared. "I mean that sincerely, gentlemen. I will open the monthly trading account to your committee at any time."

Suspicion silenced the colliers for a moment.

Abe Fordyce sensed that they were being side-tracked.

He said, "We appreciate that offer, sir, an' like as not we'll take the opportunity t'read the red ink."

Thrush shouted over the general laughter, "*Black ink: black ink. Blacklaw is not in debt.*"

"But," Peter McLean called, "you're askin' us t'accept reductions and redundancies, t'do more for less in fact?"

McLean too had little to lose. He was sixty and had two sons in trade in Falkirk. He intended to retire there soon.

"Yes," Thrush shouted. "Much of our profit is being reinvested in the fabric of the pit, which is, I'm sure you'll agree, to everybody's benefit."

A collier called Roberts exploded at this statement. He had been one of the crew in the breaching of the new section in Pit No. 2 and had lost his nephew and his best pal to carbon monoxide gas.

"Explain that t'Charlie and Willie," he bawled, struggling to make himself seen. "Is it another disaster you're after, then, t'skin the work-force down t'manageable size? Is it another hunner men you're wantin' dead?"

"That's unfair, Roberts," Wyld cried, heatedly.

"Unfair t'dead men an' widows an' orphans?" Roberts yelled.

Turning, Callum Ewing issued a quiet order and Roberts was restrained by his mates around him.

Callum Ewing said, "Will the opening of a new section mean more work, Mr. Wyld?"

Donald Wyld hesitated. "I . . . yes, of course."

"For us?"

"For some of you."

"In the back shed, by the rail yard, you've a wheen of new machinery, sir," said Abe Fordyce. "It is, so I've been reliably informed, cuttin' an' haulin' machinery of advanced design. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right," said Wyld.

"We were led t'believe that Mr. Lamont was opposed t'advanced mechanisation at this time," said Abe.

"Mr. Lamont changed his mind," said Wyld. "It was necessary to introduce machinery to cope with the thin seams."

"Tell *that* t'Colonel Coco!" Roberts shouted, furiously.

Thrush said, "Machinery means expansion."

Abe Fordyce said, "Tell us, sir, can any pick-and-shovel man operate one o'those contraptions?"

Wyld stepped closer to the railing, but Thrush beat him to it. Pitching his voice to carry to every corner of the yard, he said, "Of course not. Only trained men can operate and maintain such advanced examples of engineering."

"Will that mean more redundancies?" asked Abe.

"Perhaps."

"Give's a straight answer, for God's sake, Thrush."

"Come on, Mr. Thrush: are we losin' the pit t'machines?"

"How soon'll they be installed?"

"How many o'us will b'sent packin'?"

"What about vibrations?"

"The chances o'flash fire must be increased?"

"Give's the truth, Thrush."

Thrush said, "Are you afraid of the machines, gentlemen?"

"Aye."

"Naw."

"We're afraid o'nothin', Thrush."

"I'm glad to hear it," Thrush called out.

"*Quiet, lads! Quiet.*"

Abe Fordyce said, "Tell us the truth, sir, about owners' policy regardin' machines."

"Mr. Wyld will explain," Thrush said. "He is, after all, the manager."

"*You* tell us."

Thrush nodded.

The explosion was muffled and fairly distant, a firecracker noise, not underground. As the crowd swayed and pivoted in unison to face towards the railway yard and the line that connected the pit to the shunting engines of the Caledonian, another popping explosion occurred. The roof of a large storage shed rose up on a quilt of blue-black smoke and lazily broke into fragments in the calm summer air.

"Jesus Christ, it's the machine shed!" somebody said, softly yet audibly.

At that instant a barbarous clamour went up from the back of the ranks. "*Up the bloody miners.*" An axe-handle spun out of the crowd, whirring in the stunned silence. It cracked against the office railing and, deflected, smashed into Jock Baird's face.

The big night-shift foreman went down like a pole-axed bull, dropping against the wall of the shed. A rock shattered the window just over him and showered his body with glass. The fire hooter wailed. Whistles blew. Another voice bellowed, "*Fair play for the Blacklaw colliers.*" Davy Dunlop shot back into the managers' office and slammed the door.

Donald Wyld raised his arms, calling on the men to be calm. A stone struck him on the cheek. He flinched, ducking involuntarily, hands clasped to the wound, then came up again and with blood streaming down his chin, lifted his hands like a prophet and implored the crowd not to panic.

Callum, Abe and the others in the front rank were thrust forward, tripping and stumbling, as confusion in the rear sent their bewildered colleagues surging forward. Sudden uproar developed. Men were pushing and jostling. Henderson, a young, strong collier, jack-knifed abruptly and, clutching his skull, toppled to the dirt.

"*Bastards! Murderin' bastards!*"

Swimming against the tide, Rob Ewing struggled to reach his father. Even before he had breached half the breadth of the mob, he knew he would be too late.

The whistle shrilled again.

The fire squad's bell clanged along the foot of the hump and the four or five men in the crowd who were members of the hand-cart platoon dutifully fought to break free, to run to their posts. Smoke from the sheds wafted thinly over the yard. The crackle of the burning structure was inaudible.

Once more the whistle shrilled.

Two dozen men ran from the lane behind the latrines. They were plain dressed but armed with batons, left wrists strapped with wooden shields. Some carried short lengths of chain in their right hands as well as polished ashwood truncheons. They were the bully-boys from Glasgow, no secret infiltrators from the heartland of militant strife, but paid toughs, soldiers without the shilling, without leaders or law. All they had was experience, discipline and the assurance that if they did their work well they would be well paid and would work again soon under the pay of some other master. Surprise was on their side and they were armed.

"*Clear the yard,*" Thrush shouted. "*Clear the yard.*"

The request came late. The breakers were already at work, flailing at heads and bellies, downing old men and boys indiscriminately, herding the rest of that anxious mob towards the main gate, driving them fiercely but without valour into the cobbled corner at the top of Main Street.

It was no discredit to the miners that they ran. They had no opportunity to nurse fury. Bewildered by the sudden chain of events, cramped into three or four minutes, they harboured a sense of guilt rather than injustice. Precisely what they had done, none could be sure. But the explosion in the machinery store smacked of sabotage and the fact was that every man jack of them had seen Jock Baird felled. So they ran, pausing only to scoop up fallen brothers, to dance round, without stopping, to look back in search of sons and uncles and fathers, but running on like a flock under attack from wolves until the last of the limping, bleeding throng hobbled from the gates and the gates rattled and closed upon them and they were left, expelled, to gasp in horror at the damage that they had somehow brought upon themselves.

Worse, in a way, was soon to come.

Before the colliers could gather their wits and begin to examine causes, the sma' door in the big gate opened and Edna Brown emerged. After her came another woman, and then another, until one by one, all the women and girls from the troughs and tips were ushered from the yard to join the bewildered crowd outside the high slate-grey gates.

By that time other off-shift workers had rushed up from the cottages. Almost two hundred folk gathered on the summit where Main Street bent into the Pit Dyke road. Out of the sma' door now came clerks, gaffers and ponyboys, chippies and freighters, the whole work-force with the exception of firemen, a skeleton safety crew and the cage operators. And, after a half hour or so, before the beehive exodus had time to flag, there emerged the underground shift, brought off early, minstrel-black, blinking and bemused.

One by one, the men stepped over the high sill, telling how they had walked down an avenue of baton-armed bully-boys and how the injured, colliers and management alike, were being attended to by the company doctor who, it seemed, had been on the premises that afternoon. Fractures and gashes, the gaping heads of the expelled demonstrators were patched on the pavement by Doctor McKay who had come at once in his trap. They were bad, a couple of them, but not so bad that they would leave the crowd, virtually the whole populace of the town now, until they found out just what the hell had happened.

By six-ten o'clock that fine June night, the last face-worker had been grubbed out of his hole and conducted to the surface. Willie Green, James McGuire and old Rab McCulloch, the cage-operators, stepped out and the sma' door finally closed. The working of both pits in Blacklaw colliery came to a total halt.

The crowd now spilled along the Pit Dyke road and back down Main Street, clustered into various clans, some angry, some oddly ashamed, a few already endeavouring to deduce exactly what filthy trick had been played upon them by Houston Lamont.

It was six-twenty when both big gates were unbolted and swung wide. The crowd coalesced, bunching for a better view. The bully-boys battalion was not in evidence. Indeed, for almost three minutes, the yard lay empty, then, in procession round the gable of the blacksmith's shop, came the first of the carts. Henderson and Jock Baird shared it, both men bandaged but conscious, propped on sacks, like heroes from a battle front. And then came another cart bearing three more swathed colliers and Davy Dunlop looking as noble as possible with his wrist in a sling to support the injury he had sustained flinging himself indoors out of harm's way. And then a third cart with another aged pony in the shafts and Sydney Thrush standing spread-legged upon the planks, his smooth hair ruffled, his collar undone and the sleeves of his coat sodden with oil or blood. The ponyboys led the three carts out of the yard. The big gates remained open, creating a familiar but dramatically heightened backdrop for the strange parade.

The ambulance carts rolled very slowly through the crowd which parted solicitously, out of habit. The wounded gathered relatives around them as they pulled out of the throng and trundled off down Main Street.

It was very still after that, still enough to hear the town hall clock in Northrigg strike the half hour and the whistle of the Glasgow train as it left the Crooked Halt and headed east. Though none of the colliers knew it, Thrush's team of provocateurs were aboard, headed back to their base in Slamannan, richer by three pounds per head.

Thrush's cart stopped.

The assistant manager got down. Under the grime, his expression was inscrutible. Reaching into his coat he brought out a notice inked on a stiff card, a cobbler's hammer and six brass tacks. It was unusual to witness Thrush engaged in manual work but he did the job with customary efficiency and the notice, when tacked to the door, might have been measured off and squared by draughtsmen, so neat was its placing.

Quite unaided, Thrush put his weight on the gates and tramped against them, heaving until first one and then the other squatted over its bolt holes in the cobbles. The long iron rods were duly shot from within. The sma' door opened. Thrush stepped over the sill, turned and with a key and steel padlock made the sma' door fast. He stared at the silent crowd for an instant, implacable, almost bland, then hoisted himself back on to the flat cart and with a wordless gesture to the ponyboy had himself driven left along the Pit Dyke and out of sight behind the cottages at the back of the [redacted]

The crowd surged forward then, pushing and thrusting to study the neatly printed notice that was tacked to the locked gate. It said:

SABOTAGE AND RIOT.

IN VIEW OF THE ACTION OF MINERS IN DEFIANCE OF THE LAWS OF SABOTAGE AND RIOT LEADING TO THE GRIEVOUS WOUNDING OF OWNERS' REPRESENTATIVES AND SERIOUS DAMAGE TO OWNERS' PROPERTY, THE MANAGEMENT HEREBY DECLARES BLACKLAW COLLIERY CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER [redacted]

Signed
Donald Wyld.
MANAGER.

A sighing groan went up, burying the questions and entreaties of those too far back in the crowd to read the notice for themselves.

"Out! God, we've been locked out 'til further notice."

"But what for? What happened? What did we do?"

"Sabotage an' riot, so it says."

"Jesus!"

"Will y'look at the signature."

"Thrush?"

"No, it's Donald Wyld's fist."

"Wyld? I can hardly believe it."

"Y'can't trust a soul in this bloody world."

"Where is Wyld, then, the two-faced sneak?"

"Inside, like as not."

"Aye, protected by his gang o' Glasgow toughs."

"Never mind Wyld: what the hell d'we do now?"

"Go home," Callum Ewing advised. "An' wait t'be forgiven."

Forgiveness and retribution came quickly. Sometime during the course of that long anxious night a second notice mysteriously appeared on the pit gate, side by side with the first.

> ALL HANDS TO APPLY FOR RE-INSTATEMENT
> BY PERSONAL INTERVIEW WITH MR. THRUSH.
> SUCH INTERVIEWS AND ATTENDANT
> ENQUIRIES WILL COMMENCE AT 10 O'CLOCK
> THIS MORNING OF THURSDAY 22ND DAY OF
> JUNE, 1877.
> *Signed*
> *Sydney Thrush.*
> [redacted]

The queue began to form along the Pit Dyke road before seven, word of mouth passing the news swiftly into every household in the village. By ten o'clock the file was a half mile long, snaking round the backs and down the lane to the rear of the *Lantern* pub where a roaring trade in mugs of beer was done until a rumour sprang up that Thrush was refusing to admit any man who even smelled of drink. Within minutes the entire population of Blacklaw turned teetotal.

Flora Stalker, in her horse-drawn van, however, continued to sell Mr. Kellock's wares as fast as the wee baker could haul the stuff from the ovens and cart it up to the stationary vehicle. As yet

Thrush had issued no edict against eating, though maybe that would come soon enough.

It had not passed attention that the official notice bore Thrush's signature and that he boldly designated himself Manager. Even Sydney Thrush would not have the gall to announce his promotion without Lamont's approval. It seemed that Donald Wyld had been sacked. Perhaps that last Judas act had done for him, after all.

There were plenty of topics to keep the throng buzzing with nervous speculation as it crawled to the sma' door and gained admittance, one by one. Not only was there the matter of Wyld's expulsion to discuss but the day's newspapers brought the Full, True Story of the Blacklaw Riot, most of the reports couched in a style more appropriate to a description of Balaclava or, as one wag quietly suggested, an eye-witness account of Flodden.

How the press had come by such a wealth of raw material was a matter for considerable conjecture. It hardly mattered, though, for the authority of print now indelibly stamped the incident of June 21st as a bloody, barbarous and unprovoked riot in which serious injury had been inflicted on several courageous members of the management staff. The wanton destruction of several hundred pounds worth of new machinery had finally necessitated the summoning of a restraining force to quell the violence and clear the yard. Mr. Thrush, Pit Manager, had magnanimously elected to waive a full enquiry. He put the cause of the riot down to the hot weather and the influence of a handful of incorrigible agitators upon the honest if misguided mass. The majority of miners, Mr. Thrush declared, were in favour of the owners' proposals for expansion and well aware of the long-term benefits to the community. The editor of one Tory rag, the *Ward Examiner*, took a more jaundiced view of the proceedings and, while praising the Blacklaw management for its understanding, thundered against the forces of anarchy who sought, by exploiting greed and ignorance, to impede progress and disturb the natural balance of society.

Caps in hands and most unsure of themselves, the miners and their womenfolk trooped singly into the yard and presented themselves humbly at the trestle tables arraigned beneath the port of the pithead shaft.

The Manager conducted the interviews in person, the new Manager, Sydney Thrush, surrounded by his clerks and loyal gaffers and defended by a wall of documents, box-files and the tally-sheets on which each worker's drawing was recorded.

In most cases, reinstatement was a formality and took no time at all. The queue was cleared by two o'clock and the night-shift went down at six as usual to the accompaniment of the harsh triumphant song of the winding gear.

In the final count, only twenty-three colliers lost their jobs. Seventeen families were given one week's notice to quit their tied cottages. There was no appeal or redress, only fury and lamentation.

Though there were angry conversations that evening in the sanctuary of the *Lantern* and a secret meeting of some of the sacked hands in a field behind the Poulter's burn, for once the afflicted could drum up no active sympathy among their brethren and, by the week's end, had meekly accepted their fate.

Guilt, bewilderment, suspicion and fear, the malaise of imposed humility, were already taking their toll of the community's spirit, just as Sydney Thrush, Manager, had planned.

Four

THE BRUISE ON Rob Ewing's cheek had spread, purpling the eye socket and pouching his jaw so that the flesh quivered a little when he spoke, as if with suppressed rage.

"So that's the old man paid off," he said, quietly. "Done. Finished."

"What'll your parents do now, Rob?" Kate asked.

"Share what I bring in. It's all they can do. My mother's talkin' about findin' work of some sort now that Eileen can get about the house a wee bit."

"There's precious little work t'be found in these parts," said Kate. "When do they vacate the tied house?"

"Friday," said Rob. "Mercifully there's room enough in our place. We'd counted on havin' children, Kate, so there's the spare room. There'll be no bairns now."

Resentment and embarrassment caused Rob to look furtively away across the placid brown acre of the backs towards the curve of the moor. In his wicker basket on the grass, Neill Stalker slept peacefully. Kate worked the big wooden needles as she spoke, knitting a hank of coarse wool into a blanket for Neill's cot. He would need all the wrapping up he could get come the winter.

Other couples and groups were seated here and there in the gritty grass acres behind the middens, brick lavatories and sloping wash-houses. The gorse was in full yellow bloom, brighter than Kate ever remembered it. Though she felt sorry for Rob Ewing, there was in her now a reservation which protected her from sharing in other folks' problems — even an old and dear friend like Rob. When she glanced at Neill she could not prevent a wisping smile, in spite of the gravity of the conversation.

She said, "Your father wasn't hurt in the riot?"

"Shaken but not injured," said Rob.

"How's your face?"

"It'll heal," said Rob. "It's the state of this bloody pit that worries me more than my gob."

"Has Wyld really gone?"

"Nobody seems t'know for sure."

"Thrush is a devil, Rob. You'll need t'have a care about crossin' him, especially now."

"Thrush! Christ, I could kill that bugger. I mean it, Kate. I used t'think I was a hard chap, tough as pit boots, but I never hated anyone before. But, God, I hate that Sydney Thrush. He's too clever; far more cunning than Lamont ever was."

"What's happened t'Lamont?"

"You should know."

"Me?"

"He's moping for your Mirrin."

Astonished, Kate almost dropped the needles. "Our Mirrin! Away an' don't talk daft, Rob Ewing. Our Mirrin's been gone this year'n'more. Lamont's too responsible to let a girl get under his skin for that length of time."

"But y'admit there was . . . somethin' between them?"

Kate realised that Rob Ewing too had gained in cunning. He had trapped her into the admission. She said, "Somethin', perhaps, but not what everybody thought."

"The death of his sister must've been a blow t'Lamont," Rob said. "I'm not as callous as some round these parts. I think he loved her, his sister, I mean."

"Is it so hard t'credit a coalmaster with the ability t'love?"

"Then there's that precious wife," Rob went on. "She's got her nose in everywhere. Thrush was her choice o'manager. Donald Wyld hinted that t'Jock Baird."

"How is Jock?"

"Laid up wi' a broken jaw. It'll be a while before he tackles meat again wi' that mouthful o'stumps."

"Rob, who started it?"

"None of us."

"Agitators?"

"Maybe."

"In that case . . ."

"Ach, what the hell does it matter?" said Rob. He plucked a leaf of grass and stuck it in his mouth. Kate shooed a fly from the proximity of Neill's cradle. "We all know we've been diddled. We're gettin' used t'it in Blacklaw. I don't give a curse any more, Kate, an' that's the truth. I'll work m'darg an' keep my nose clean an' hope I'm still here a year hence. It *is* worse elsewhere; that's an incontestable fact."

"An' those machines?"

Rob snorted. "The so-called act o'sabotage was nothin'. I can't say for sure, but there's a rumour that there were no new machines in the fired shed. I heard that Thrush had them moved out the night before the riot. All that went up in the blaze was a pump engine and a mass of cheap ventilation hose."

"But the newspapers . . . ?"

"Thrush fed them the story."

Kate shook her head in mild disbelief.

Rob said, "Ach, it's too fine a night t'waste talkin' about Thrush an' the pit. What are y'knitting?"

"A blanket."

"For him?" Rob nodded at the sleeping baby.

"Aye."

"He's done you a power of good, Kate. You haven't looked this well for months."

"I like him fine. He's a grand wee chap. No bother."

Then Rob was staring at her, straight at her.

"Who's bairn is he?" the collier asked, with almost savage directness.

"He's mine."

"Mirrin's?"

"No, mine."

"Kate, y'know what I mean."

"No, Rob, I don't know what you mean?"

"I . . . I *must* know if he's Mirrin's child."

"Must?"

"Because of . . . of what there once was between us."

Gathering her wool, Kate carefully placed the needles and the hank into the wicker basket and got to her feet.

"All that's in the past, Rob," Kate said. "I'm goin' in now. Give my regards t'your father an' mother, an' remember me t'Eileen. If you need a hand with the flittin' just let us know."

"Kate, listen . . ."

He reached out but she evaded him and he did not have the gall to hold her there against her will. She could have told him the truth, of course. It was tempting to confide in somebody, to save Mirrin's reputation with old friends like the Ewings. But it was imprudent. Mam would not have stood for it. In a way, Flora Stalker enjoyed the mystery. It seemed to make the boy, though only an infant still, different from his generation, to set him that little bit apart. That was the change least evident but most telling in her mother; the growing desire not to be in kilter with the community that had once sheltered her with its respect. It was an attitude that Kate too was coming to understand.

"I'll carry him in for you," Rob said.

"I'll manage."

"I'm sorry, Kate. I had no right t'ask that question. I'll never ask again."

"All right," Kate Stalker said. "Then I'd be grateful for a hand with Neill's basket. But mind you don't drop him."

"As if I would," Rob Ewing said and, for the first time that evening, managed a smile that was not marred by pain and bitterness.

In spite of its vintage, the gig was in perfect condition, with a mint look to it as if it had been painted only that morning. The pony too was plump and sleek and might also have received a coat of clear varnish that very day. Gig and pony belonged to Sydney Thrush, relics of better days when he and Anna lived in a large, if ramshackle, house up in Fife and had struggled to rescue the Barshotten colliery, their shared legacy, from ruin. That the attempt had failed was not the Thrushs' fault. It was due to an irreversible erosion in the fabric of the workings and surface buildings which had eventually led, some ten years before, to a damning report from a vigilant committee of the Inspectors of

Mines Commission and the immediate closure of the Thrush death trap.

The experience he had gained as a young man in those hard-bitten days when he was an owner by inheritance, had moulded Sydney Thrush for life, had made him, out of admittedly malleable material, what he was today. He did not think of the loss of Barshotten much now, or dwell on the ignominy that had attended enforced bankruptcy charges, the rout sale of the family mansion and the sullied acres that the Thrush family had claimed as their own for almost a century but through greed and short-sightedness had burned out before Sydney came of age to stage a rescue.

The gig and the elderly little pony were all that now remained of those grinding but exciting days when he and Anna had been obliged to call no man or woman 'sir or mistress' and toady to the influential.

Dusk was an hour off when Thrush steered the gig into the yard at the side of the *Brookhill Frog*, a public house tucked into a cul-de-sac on the eastern outskirts of Hamilton. The establishment was much less exotic than its name suggested, two cottages knocked together and licensed for dispensing beer and spirits to a mixed clientele. It was reputed to be a place of assignation, for the brewing of plots and the meeting of illicit lovers. It was assignation, of a sort, that took Thrush there that evening.

Having tied the pony to the hitching rail, he entered the tiny snug by its back door. A bar no longer than a man's forearm stood in one corner. There were three tables and six chairs. At one table, alone in the low room, sat Donald Wyld, a corked bottle of wine and two glasses upon the table before him.

As Thrush sat down, Wyld opened the wine with a corkscrew and poured out two glasses. Glancing round, Thrush lifted the glass and sipped it speculatively, as if suspecting that it might be poisoned.

"I wish you luck, Sydney," Donald Wyld said.

"Do you, indeed?"

"Why not," Wyld said. "I'm willing to concede defeat. The worst man won, which seems to be the canon law of victory these days."

"I trust, Wyld, that you are not about to ask for your job back?"

"I know better than that." Wyld put down the wine untouched. "On the other hand, I could have my job back tomorrow if I really wanted it."

"I doubt it," said Thrush. "You resigned verbally to me. I carried your resignation to the owners and they, verbally, accepted it and, under the duress of the lock-out, saw fit to appoint me manager there and then."

"You spoke to Lamont?"

"I . . . yes, I received his sanction."

"He was drunk, was he?"

"Really, old fellow, this is quite immaterial. Why did you request this interview? I would have thought that the situation was perfectly plain. I am the manager of Blacklaw colliery. Lamont, sober, has approved my appointment and it will be contracted legally by the weekend. You can't depose me, if that's what's in your mind."

"Tell me, Thrush, old fellow, why are you doing this?"

"I don't understand your question."

"What do you hope to gain from such bullying, from such filthy tricks? Respect? That isn't the way, and you are sharp enough to realise it."

"Respect? From the colliers, you mean? I don't want their respect. Good Lord, Wyld, do you suppose I care what *they* think of me. No, no. I don't care for respect of that order."

"Is it money you want?"

"Money — certainly."

"What else?"

"Power."

"You admit it."

"I'm not ashamed of it. I like power. I will do well for the owners of Blacklaw. I will keep that pit thriving in spite of the disastrous state of industry. I can guarantee it."

"If Lamont knew how you'd employed agitators . . ."

"So that's it, Wyld. You intend to blackmail me into giving you back your job."

"It isn't for you t'say, Thrush. But, no, I don't want work in Blacklaw now. I wouldn't be a damned ponyboy under your management."

"Probably just as well."

"But I do believe that Lamont should know what happened behind his back."

"He does know."

"You told him, I suppose?"

"He knows, for example, that you condoned my employment of armed pickets for the management's protection."

"Does he know that I traded my job for your promise that you wouldn't batter half a dozen stupid colliers t'death?"

"I kept my part of that bargain, Wyld. The most serious injury was to Baird, and he's management."

"All right, Thrush," Wyld said. "But I warn you . . ."

"Warn me?" Thrush tutted: he seemed genuinely irritated. "You are as obsolete as . . . as a flint axe, Wyld. I don't grudge you the tatters of your dignity, but *I* warn *you* not to cross me. You are a sentimentalist, Wyld. What's more you are envious of my success."

"I wouldn't call it success."

"You have seen the figures. Twenty-eight per cent increase in output, allied to a thirty per cent final figure reduction in the work-force. The pit is flourishing."

"For you? For Lamont?"

"I make it flourish."

"Until you push them too far: then they will strike."

"Strike? I doubt it, Wyld."

"You will beat them into submission, won't you? You'll rob them of everything through fear."

"Of course."

"God, but you're evil. Wait 'til Houston Lamont learns of this."

"He knows."

"Not him: he's not like you. He'll baulk eventually, Thrush. Then what'll you do: beat *him* half t'death?"

"Ah! So you intend to run to dear Mr. Lamont and tell him all," said Thrush. "Then what? He'll re-instate you, sack me, and all will be rosy again. That is nonsense."

"We'll see," said Wyld, thinly. "You're not the only bloody person who can draft reports."

"Reports on what?"

"Names, payments: the methods you used t'start and stop the mock riot yesterday."

"You have a report?"

"I do."

"And you will present it to Mr. Lamont?"

"I will."

Thrush smiled. "Good."

Wyld leapt to his feet. "We'll see how smug you are tomorrow, Thrush."

"What about this wine: you've hardly touched it."

"You drink it."

"Thank you, Mr. Wyld. I will. I don't believe in waste."

"You're a ruthless bastard, Thrush."

"And you, Wyld, are a foolish idealist."

"Then one of us will have to go."

"Hah! That *is* ridiculous. You, old fellow, have already gone."

Wedges of deep blue shadow still marked the lawns west of the mansion when Wyld and Lamont met in an interview that the coalmaster would have preferred to avoid. Nebulous guilt over Dorothy's death and the loss of that centre of love which his sister had represented gave way, though only briefly, to guilt of another kind. He felt ashamed of the way he had treated his old colleague, Donald Wyld, a man whose loyalty he had never questioned.

"You didn't waste much time being rid of me, Mr. Lamont."

"There was an emergency, Donald."

"What exactly did Thrush tell you?"

Lamont dropped into his chair, shoulders hunched. Deep lines at the corners of his mouth and his hooded eyelids gave him a brooding, introverted appearance. His waistcoat and shirt were not fresh.

"Thrush told me everything," Lamont said.

"Including what's in this report, sir?"

In the early morning stillness, with a ground mist shrouding the oaks, the Brighouse clock struck six with a sharpness that caused both the coalmaster and his former manager to start slightly. The household was not awake yet, only the poor little scullion who had admitted Wyld at the kitchen door and who had brought the message, in fear and trembling, to Lamont dozing in his study.

Lamont lifted the stiff-backed document and scanned its contents diffidently.

"Most of it, yes," he murmured. "The essence of it, certainly."

Standing before the desk, Wyld said incredulously, "*You knew?*"

Lamont tossed the folio on to the dusty pile of documents which spilled over the wire basket to his left. "What I did not know, I surmised."

"I . . . I find it hard to believe, sir."

"Why, Donald?"

"It's . . . it's not your way, Mr. Lamont."

"What is my way, Donald? I wish I knew myself."

"And my resignation?"

"I'm sorry about that, Donald. I would have preferred you to remain in my employment. But, under the circumstances I had no alternative but to accept your verbal resignation and appoint Thrush immediately to the position."

"Did it not cross your mind that Thrush might have been lying?"

"He had no need to lie. He planned it. The plan worked. You resigned. I even know why."

Wyld said, "So the running of Blacklaw colliery is to be left to Thrush and to your wife?"

"You're well out of it, Donald."

"Mr. Lamont, when will you come t'your senses?"

Lamont said, "I'm more aware of what's going on than you, Thrush or Edith imagines. It's regretful that you'll not be here to assist. But I can't have the management split."

"I see. You accept all that Thrush says and does," Wyld said. "You accept that Thrush rules through fear and the billy-club. Only you can moderate his policies, now, Mr. Lamont. Your miners need you."

Lamont shook his head. "They don't need me. I doubt if they've ever needed me. Besides, I'm tired. I'm out of practice in asserting myself. Sydney Thrush will run a profitable pit."

"For you, not for the colliers."

"Then the colliers may go elsewhere," Lamont snapped.

"I never thought I'd hear the day . . ."

With a sudden blaze of anger, Lamont lunged forward in the chair. "They talk of *their* freedom. 'Make *us* free', they cry. This is the freedom they want, is it not? They have the right to leave my employment, at any time."

"You know that's not possible in most cases."

"Why not?"

"They have wives, families, a tied house . . ."

"Aye, *they* are protected; protected by *me*. *They* take from *me*. But when I ask for something in return, they revile me. What sort of freedom, Wyld, do you suppose I have? They are *my* gaolers."

"The heart's gone out of you, Mr. Lamont, and out of this pit," Wyld said, sadly. "Thrush told me that you knew what was happening and I didn't believe him. But I see now that Blacklaw is a doomed town, a dead town, because of you."

For a long minute, Lamont said nothing, then, his mood changing yet again, he slumped back into the chair. "Where will you go, Donald?"

"I've a younger sister in Shotts. She'll give me board for a while."

"Where will you find work?"

Wyld shrugged. "The Grebe, or the Tar Pit, or maybe in Monksport."

"Hell holes: death traps."

"Where else am I liable to be taken on — an *idealist* like me?"

Lamont reached forward and plucked a long envelope from between the decanters. It was sealed with the old wax stamp that had marked documents many years ago and which Wyld had never seen used before.

"Take it, man," Lamont said.

"I . . . I don't want your handouts, sir. I'm not short of money yet."

"It's a letter of recommendation, that's all," Lamont said. "It should carry some weight, Donald."

"I . . . thank you, Mr. Lamont," Wyld said. "I'm sorry that it ever had to come to this."

"You're an excellent manager, Donald. No coalmaster could wish for better. But you are not right for me or for Blacklaw at this time."

"What changed you, Mr. Lamont?"

"Hard times — and circumstances."

"Circumstances like Alex Stalker's daughter?"

"That's impudence, Wyld. You overstep yourself."

"Aye, but I think it's the truth."

Flushed, Lamont reached for a decanter and poured whisky into a glass. He did not offer Wyld hospitality and the liquor, it seemed, was needful to him, to steady him at the very mention of her name.

"You've been kind enough to give me a reference of character, Mr. Lamont," Donald Wyld went on. "May I return that generous gesture by giving you this."

From a notecase in his pocket Wyld extracted a folded newspaper clipping and handed it to the coalmaster. Lamont scowled down at the advertisement.

> MIRRIN STALKER, SONG BIRD OF THE NORTH, APPEARING EXCLUSIVELY WITH WILFRID TALBOYS AND THE CROPLEY SISTERS FOR THE SUMMER SEASON AT THE GRAND PROMENADE THEATRE, BEALE.

"Where did you get this, Donald?"

"It's from a Yorkshire newspaper: a friend of my sister sent it to her. She sent it to me."

"Mirrin Stalker in the theatre," said Lamont. "So that much is true. How old is the advertisement?"

"A week or two at most."

"The Song Bird of the North: how . . . how ridiculous!"

"Beale is a fairly respectable watering place, Mr. Lamont, in spite of its proximity to Blackpool."

Still holding the clipping, Lamont looked up. "The Stalkers are nursing a baby. Could it be Mirrin's child?"

"I've heard it said. But personally I don't believe a word of it, Mr. Lamont."

"Whose, then?"

"Does it matter, sir. She's in the past now, for you. Along with everything else. I think, Mr. Lamont, that you were well shot of the girl."

"Perhaps she is well shot of me," Lamont said. "Why did you give me this information, Donald?"

"Call it a . . . a parting gift, Mr. Lamont."

"Thank you, Donald. I wish you well, wherever you wind up."

"I might say the same to you, sir," Donald Wyld said and, abruptly, turned and let himself out of the airless study and out of Lamont's mansion.

Lamont sipped whisky. The closed door, the faint sound of Wyld's boots on the gravel, rapidly diminishing into soundlessness, left him more alone than ever. It seemed that he had lost, or alienated, all his former friends, the few who had approached close enough to see beneath the stern façade and realise that he was a man as well as a coalmaster. All he had left now were enemies. And yet, by his decisions, by his deliberate refusals to take a hand in the sweep of affairs that threatened to destroy Blacklaw as well as Houston Lamont, he had condoned all that had happened at the pit. He had made himself an ally of Edith and Sydney Thrush, consciously and deliberately endorsing their hard-line policies.

Mirrin Stalker: Summer Season: Beale. On the coast, a burgeoning resort, so he had heard. It had been lampooned in *Punch* not so long since; a town that could not make up its mind. It had a theatre, on the saloon principle. Leech had even drawn it, with ittle tipsy, ebullient figures clinging to the railings, teacups and champagne glasses in their hands as the wind roared in from the sea.

Mirrin Stalker in the theatre, singing comic songs and dancing: he had always imagined her being miserable, too, as scarred by the short-lived, tragic affair as he was. The little he had heard by way of gossip was true, it seemed.

He supposed he could have utilised his authority, ridden mperiously down to the narrow house in Main Street, as he had once before when Alex Stalker was alive, and demanded explanations as his right. But he could not do that now. It was implicit in the bargain he had made with Mirrin that the family would be left alone. Damnation, he was paying twenty pounds per annum, through that rogue Havershaw, to have her precious brother educated! He had every right to 'annoy' the family if he chose to do so. He could even insist that they inform him who had fathered the child.

No, they were nothing to him. He had relinquished his right to that kind of relationship with any of his colliers, even the Stalkers, when he had given Thrush the opportunity to usurp Wyld, to strike at the spirit of the community. There would be no more singing at the shaft, no more gruff respect now. But that had nothing to do with the events of the past two years. The disaster had ended all that. Like the stability of so many men and women in Blacklaw, his own had been blown asunder that dismal March morning, twenty-seven months ago.

The baby? It *must* be Mirrin's. The Stalkers, proud that they were, would rear no other infant openly as their own.

The thought was like a knife digging into his gut. Mirrin's son. It could have been his son, their son. His shoulders heaved. He pushed the whisky glass away from him, sliding his body forward across the desk. The tide of papers, thrust before him, spread across the carpet.

In his fist the clipping crumpled into a ball.

Edith Lamont twisted the frilled parasol in her white gloved hand and allowed the cupola of watered silk to elevate itself sufficiently to protect Sydney Thrush's head from the rays of the noon sun.

It was not Edith's habit to take the air, particularly at that hour of the day when the weather was hot, but, that very morning, protocol notwithstanding, she had suddenly grown tired of dark mourning and, on whim, had clad herself, with Anna's help, in her lightest and most flattering summer mode. It seemed natural, then, to take a before-luncheon perambulation with her friend, Mr. Thrush, confining her route, of course, to the paths east of the mansion, well away from Houston's spy-hole in the ell of the west wing. Here the flowers were in full, glorious bloom and the rhododendron shrubs provided a little cool shade.

"We have done well, Sydney."

"I would hardly call it a triumph, ma'am."

"Must we be formal?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I think, when we are alone, Sydney, it would not be amiss for you to call me Edith."

"Very well, Edith."

"And for us to talk quite plainly."

"How plainly?"

"As plainly as you are disposed to do. I refer, of course, to my husband. Houston is not *quite* ready to hand over full control of the colliery. That action will require a deed or bond of transfer, and he s not so removed from reality that he will send for a lawyer and sit imself down and sign. Not *quite* yet."

"Perhaps if you approached him?" Thrush suggested. "I feel hat the coalmaster would be relieved to be discharged of all esponsibility."

"Indeed, that is my feeling too, Sydney. But there are factors of which you are unaware, private and personal matters that will prevent Houston. He knows that I want control. For that reason lone, if for no other, he will not make Blacklaw over into my charge."

"If the coalmaster continues to drink he will fall ill."

"He has a strong constitution," said Edith.

"Now that Wyld has finally gone," Sydney Thrush said, "many mportant decisions will have to be made. Let us assume that you — Edith — do not feel competent to make such decisions and Mr. Lamont is persuaded to make them and the results of those decisions turn out very badly . . ."

"Badly?"

"In terms of health and the welfare of the work-force," Thrush xplained. "I imagine the Inspector of Mines might be interested n the reasons. I have some sway with the Inspector; a little, not a ot. Enough, however, to make him examine Mr. Lamont's competence more closely."

"Power of attorney," said Edith. "Strangely, I discussed this very subject only last month with Lord Shawcrofts."

"It is difficult to force the court to move against an owner," aid Thrush. "Many coalmasters are much more . . . irresponsible han your husband. However, I do believe that you might obtain *ffective* governing control, if not the actual purse-strings, by a diligent campaign."

"Unless Houston pulls himself together."

Thrush faltered in his step, the tassel of the parasol brushing his forehead. "Is that liable to happen?"

"Now that Dorothy is dead, I am uncertain as to what he will do."

"Mrs. Lamont — Edith — let us be frank. How far will you go o achieve your aim?"

It was Edith's turn to falter. Long after she had ceased to love Houston, she had reluctantly continued to admire him. Her vanity and selfishness had helped to build the wall between them. But the pit had been at the back of it. The pit was the escape that Houston had used when things had been at their worst. He had done then, after Gordon's death, what she was doing now. He had buried himself in work, in Blacklaw. She could have borne that, found outlets for her own energy in Edinburgh and Glasgow society, in charitable work in the cities. In time, she might even have wheedled a small apartment in town from him. But he had wanted more. The Stalker girl had given him happiness, forcing Edith to realise how hollow her own life had become, how empty of love.

They could have lived well, husband and wife, travelled, entertained. The colliery could have been made to turn out quite enough profit to sustain them in a certain style. That would have drawn them together. It was the kind of life that she had wanted all along. She blamed Houston for denying it to her. How immeasurably sweeter it would have been to be a partner, and not merely a discarded wife, to a man like Houston rather than a sly opportunist like Sydney Thrush.

She shrugged the thought aside.

"I will go as far as I have to," she said.

"Even to suggesting that your husband is mad?"

"I . . . I . . . yes, even to that. His sister was mad. It is in the family, and known to be so."

"Then you must bring him out," Thrush advised.

"Out? Where?"

"Let him be seen," Thrush said. "It is not enough that he has become a recluse. He must also be seen to be publicly irresponsible for his actions."

"I'm not sure that . . ."

"Naturally, Edith, I leave the decision to you."

"How would . . . ?"

"Discreetly," Thrush said. "Society already sympathises with you."

"Does it? What have you heard?"

Thrush brushed that vain question aside. "But once the process has begun there will be no turning back, Edith."

"I do not know that I am strong enough."

"I believe that you are."

"No, Sydney," Edith said. "I . . . I cannot cold-bloodedly undertake to commit my husband . . ."

Edith's refutation of ambition was interrupted.

Ahead of the couple, round the crook of the path from the direction of the kitchens, Anna Thrush made her appearance. She was running. Not even her brother could recall when last Anna had given in to urgency and had cast dignity aside. But she was running now, skirts caught up, thick ankles exposed, the keys on her belt, badges of housekeeper's office, jingling. One lock of hair had come loose too, in her haste, and dangled disreputably over her eye.

Frozen in apprehension, Edith Lamont and Sydney Thrush waited at the mouth of the path into the shrubbery.

Hand to her heaving bosom, Anna said, "He's gone."

"Who has gone, dear?" asked Sydney.

"Mr. Lamont; the coalmaster."

"Gone where?"

"To . . . to the railway station. He's . . . he's gone. I asked Archie. He heard the master tell Sandy Willocks to drive him to Hamilton station. Not only . . . that . . . but he packed luggage, a very great deal of luggage."

"Then he has gone for a while," said Sydney Thrush. "Anna, did Mr. Lamont leave a note for Edith?"

"I looked carefully in the study and the other rooms, too, but there's nothing, not the scrape of a pen."

"Perhaps he's gone for a holiday," Thrush said, smiling. "How odd!"

"Left me?" said Edith. "Abandoned me? But what will happen to the house, and the pit?"

"Both," said Sydney Thrush, "will prosper, Edith, you need have no fear of that."

"But what . . . what if he never returns?"

"Somehow I think he will," said Thrush. "And when he does, you will be prepared, Edith, will you not?"

Tactfully, Sydney Thrush offered the small woman his hand. She took it, clung to it, her shock and bewilderment sloughing off rapidly.

"Oh, yes," she said, at length. "I'll be prepared."

"Good," Thrush said. "Now, Anna, you may serve luncheon in half an hour." Taking Edith's arm, he escorted her back to the mansion to pry about for clues as to where the coalmaster had gone.

Five

At that time, Beale boasted the longest marine promenade in England, though its neighbour, Blackpool, seemed determined to outstrip it before another season elapsed. Eventually, so Wilf Talboys declared, the two proms would meet in the region of Spearsbridge like runaway locomotives and there would be *the* most almighty crash.

Rivalry between the booming resorts was a sure-fire source of amusement which Wilf stoked daily with an endless series of sketches along the lines of 'The Gentleman from Beale Meets the Girl from Blackpool', or vice versa. Such quips quickly established camaraderie with an audience all too ready to acknowledge that folk who holidayed in Beale had more 'tone' than those who boarded in the 'infant commonwealth' of Blackpool. For all that, the distinction was not so great that the happy hordes from Bolton, Liverpool or the wilds of Lancashire were made to feel uncomfortable and the robust vulgarity which lay close below the surface of Talboys' acts was carefully preserved.

Heartiness and breezy wit were spiced with songs, dances and an occasional 'tearjerker'. Mirrin could always be counted upon to redden all eyes with a heartfelt rendering of a work-song or a Scottish ballad, though her image was becoming increasingly sophisticated with each passing week. Groomed by Wilf and Ada during the 'tour' in the early part of the year, and encouraged by Harrison Colcutt's expenditure on costumes commensurate with the profits he was now taking, she soon developed a certain stylish elegance.

A month into the season at Beale and Mirrin had gained a reputation that extended up the whole north-west coast, clearly distinguishing the Grand's performers from the ruck of pierrots and minstrels in their flapping tents on beaches and foreshores. Colcutt, that august, ruthless recluse, had no reason to regret his gamble in putting Talboys into the Grand. Even Ockram had been heard to admit that Wilfrid's show was the agent's star attraction these days.

The Grand Promenade Theatre had been constructed at the same time as the pier. In fact, it *was* the pier; the 'shortest pier in England' Wilf Talboys called it, making its lack of size sound like a virtue. The unusual three storey construction of cream stucco, brick, glass and wrought-iron housed tearooms, coffeeshops and two saloons where beer and spirits were served. It also had a red tile roof and four castellated towers which could be seen from miles out to sea. The theatre itself was compact but well equipped, with much expensive gilt and plush in the boxes and circle, and ample ingress from the other parts of the 'Pleasure Palace' and the bracing outdoor decks. But the theatre, Colcutt's investment, was the heart of the palace and Mirrin Stalker, that summer, was the heart of the theatre.

Though they lodged in Nixons, a second-rate hotel in Lucia Street, the Talboys, and Mirrin especially, were respected in the resort and generated considerable interest wherever they went, whether riding on the sands or dining in Blue's Supper Rooms. Mirrin's morning visit to the Bathing Machine brought out a crowd of spectators that stopped all traffic on that part of the front and, so it was said, caused the railing to bulge for a hundred and fifty yards.

Needless to say, Mirrin's attraction was an exploitable quality and Wilf was not above exploiting it for all it was worth, covering the rest of the troupe in its reflected glory.

It was Colcutt, through Ockram, however, who provided the busy comic skit 'Alphabet on the Pier', which involved all the members of the cast through twenty-four short satirical verses and changes of hats, including, under W, a part hand-fashioned for Mirrin: 'I'm a Wicked Beguiling Young Witch'. So much of a show-stopper did that single verse become that Colcutt turned up trumps a week later with a specially-written song with that self-same title, together with a high-waisted and expensive costume and a large, even more expensive hat, from beneath whose shadow Mirrin flirted outrageously with the boys in the boxes and stalls.

By the following Friday, the queue for the last evening performance looped twice round the pier telescope. Though the wind was high and the evening generally dull none of the folk seemed to mind in the least. On Sunday, Ockram journeyed into Beale again, bearing in a large package a dress almost identical to the stage costume, which Mirrin was 'instructed' to wear upon her 'constitutionals' with Wilf and Blanche. Scudding before her growing fame like a yacht in the bay, Mirrin hadn't the slightest objection to adding a strain of notoriety to her reputation, though the material used in the show was innocent enough to cause offence only to the most prudish.

At first Blanche Talboys' jealous suspicion of Mirrin had caused much bitterness and repetitions of the Grossby sulks. But Mirrin had more than enough ebullience to spread about and was careful, as the summer progressed, to include Blanche in many of her 'escapades', ensuring that the plain young woman was not neglected, on stage or off, and received her fair share of fuss and attention. In another duet, 'Mermaids', Mirrin chose to play the clown and allow Blanche to show off her voice and her figure and reap the approval of the audience.

The stage was Mirrin's whole life. She carried the manner with her out into the streets of the resort with an easy confidence that, said Pru, was the hallmark of the star. She would laugh and joke with waitresses in the coffee shops, turn aside the suggestive comments of the blades in Blue's, chat to round-eyed youngsters in the shopping arcade and wave to the elderly gentlemen in their chairs along the sea wall. She was outgoing without being unduly forward, amusing without being brash, self-mocking without being undignified — and astute enough to acknowledge that, though she was the principal attraction, her success depended on the hard work and experience that the Talboys generously put at her disposal.

During the course of that summer, Mirrin also earned a great deal of money. Ticket receipts from the Grand made pretty reading, running between four and five thousand admissions each week. From that sum, Ockram — who was also Colcutt's roving accountant — extracted the agent's percentage and a cut to recoup the outlay on costumes. The remainder was divided more or less equally between the five performers. In exchange, the troupe spent fourteen hours each day, six days in each week, rehearsing and performing, regularly changing their songs and sketches to coax Beale's summer residents back again and again, to see what the Talboys had come up with now, or to learn, from Mirrin Stalker, some stirring new chorus.

There were children's shows in the morning, and matinées for the more venerable holidaymakers, with the accent on nostalgia and sentiment; an early evening show for the whole family, with much comedy and clowning, and a final two-hour performance for 'the bats and the owls', when the wit was a little more risqué and the costumes a shade more daring.

As the lanterns flickered in the warm ozone, and the flags snapped in the breezes and the sea lay outside like champagne or porter according to the weather and the state of the tide, Mirrin Stalker thought that the summer would go on for ever, and that the whole world was in Beale and on holiday.

The intrusions that Blacklaw made into this tinsel existence were few. Even Kate's long letter concerning Drew's behaviour and the arrival of the baby angered Mirrin only for a short time. In a postscript Kate implied that the baby was a joy to them — and Mirrin knew enough of her sister to accept that without question. Mam too, said Kate, was blossoming with a grandchild to attend to, and told how the infant travelled in style round the streets of Blacklaw in a basket in the baker's cart. There was much news in that long letter; sad news about Dorothy Lamont's death, bad news about the Ewings and the riot which the new pit manager, Thrush, had put down with such cleverness. During the course of her reading, Mirrin was responsive and interested. But none of Kate's gossip, not even the dramatic parts about Drew, the baby and Dorothy Lamont's death, seemed really capable of touching her now.

When she finished reading the letter, she wrote an immediate reply in tumbling, sprawling, dashing handwriting — she had a show at three o'clock — enclosed a five-pound banknote, sealed the envelope and sent it off at once, via the landlord's eldest, to the post office. That done, she glanced over Kate's letter once more, then folded it and put it away in the bottom of her trunk.

Immediately she found herself relieved from homesickness or concern by the need to get round to the Grand. Ada and Blanche were already calling her to hurry.

She paused only for a moment, frowning slightly. She was an aunt again, aunt to a bastard child by the name of Neill Campbell. She could not imagine it. Indeed, she could not, at that time, ever imagine herself entering Blacklaw again. Oddly, the stuff of life in the Lanarkshire coal town, the births and deaths, sickness, danger, hardship, seemed trivial in comparison with the afternoon performance, with the proper rendering of the latest song and the execution of the dance that went with 'Pretty Parasols'.

But Blacklaw, Mirrin was soon to discover, was not so distant after all.

August was approaching, the high point of the English season when gentlemen from manufacturing and trading offices in Lancashire and Yorkshire came to join their little wifey-pifeys' for a day or two and the resort would be thronged with visitors all eager to spend their cash. The latest novelty was the Day Excursion, that famous 'breather' offered by the railway companies, which swelled the crowds in Blackpool and even in Beale. Unsettled weather, however, was causing concern to boat hirers and the leasers of chairs, to the donkeymen and the bathing machine operators. But, as Wilf shouted, it was a *very* ill wind that didn't blow somebody good, and the palace's indoor pursuits, including the music hall, benefited from rain as much as the sellers of umbrellas, yellow sou'westers and rubber galoshes. During a wet spell there was seldom a seat to be had in the Grand, for any of the shows, and Talboys was enough of a trouper to pack in an extra matinée in the wake of afternoon tea. On those occasions, the cast didn't leave the pier at all between breakfast and late supper, snatching meals on trays in the coffin-like dressing rooms which hung below the level of the pier deck and reverberated with the thunder of the big breakers rolling in from the Irish Sea.

The rain was a drizzling haze wafted like fine spray on the wind, tasting of salt and disappointment. It did not daunt some gentlemen, those seekers after health, who strode into it like stalwarts, breathing deeply and wiping the moisture from their whiskers with the flats of their hands. But it did tend to dampen the spirits of ladies and children rather quickly, and Talboys' troupe had to work harder than ever to offer a fair share of jollity for their shillings and pence. Life, for the artistes became one long, exhausting show.

It was a wild night, the worst of the season. The early house had not been quite jam-packed. The sight of mountainous waves lashing pier and promenade persuaded many families to remain indoors to make their own entertainment in their lodgings or retire early to bed after dinner. Venturing into the elements, however, had a quality of daring which young men, and their more reckless female companions, could not resist and the 'Owl House' performance was crammed to capacity. With beer, wine and spirits flowing in the saloons as antidotes to depression, the audience was rowdier than usual and the palace's team of 'pacifiers' kept busy evicting boozy pugilists and strident warblers. As a result there was a certain edgy desperation to the performance that night.

Even Mirrin was aware of an aggressiveness which she had experienced only once or twice before. It came, Pru told her, from fatigue and the thought that the magic which they somehow seemed able to work again and again would fail them on that teeming night.

It took half an hour to settle the audience; another fifteen minutes to warm them up. At Talboys' insistence the intervals were shortened to five minutes, to avoid too much taking on of liquor, though the licensees complained and threatened to report him to the directors. The performance trundled on, gathering speed and a nervous brittle energy that communicated itself to the folk in the stalls and made them uneasy.

Wiping her face with a towel then angling it to Pru to powder with a rabbits' foot brush, Mirrin said, "What can we do? Do we carry on as planned?"

"It's in the programme," said Blanche. "The orchestra . . ."

"Damn the orchestra," said Mirrin. "I can't stand this . . . this atmosphere."

"We'll just have to get through it," said Ada. "Somehow."

Pru coughed, turning her head away.

"Are you ill, Pru?" demanded Wilf.

"No, no, I'm all right."

"Then stop that hacking, please."

"Wilf, shouting at Pru won't do any good," Ada snapped.

"I didn't shout."

"Listen," Mirrin interrupted. "The music's started. I'm . . . I'm really frightened."

"You'll be all right, Mirrin," said Blanche. "It's me they can't stand the sight of. If one of those ruffians dares throw . . ."

"It's as if they'd seen it all before," said Mirrin. "What's wrong?"

"We're feeling the pace: we're a tiny bit stale, that's all," Wilf explained. "Now, *please*, Mirrin, just do your best. Give them a lot of eyes, y'know. And sing loud."

"I'm hoarse wi' singin' loud."

"There it is. Go on: go on."

She did not feel like a Wicked, Beguiling Young Witch. She felt more like a Withered, Bedraggled Old Hag. She tugged the floppy hat down over her face to hide her ugliness — she was sure she looked haggard that night — and flung herself into the arena of light against the backcloth of a beach with sand and blue sky the like of which had never been seen outside of Africa.

Mirrin sang in a kind of trance. She went through all the actions, playing up, at first, to a beet-faced sergeant of Fusiliers, who glared at her with eyes as glassy as marbles and then, to Mirrin's horror, fashioned an explicitly obscene gesture with his fist. Confused and distraught, she swung away and heard the sergeant, more bibulous than she had imagined, bawling in a barracks' voice what he would do to her if he had her flat on her back. It took two of the Grand's strongest bouncers to eject the sergeant who, mercifully, was not popular enough with his corporals to lead his companions into battle against Ockram's forces.

Suddenly, it seemed to Mirrin that the entire audience was composed of such grotesques. Through the smokey air, she found her eyes picking out lewd tableaux, couples nuzzling each other in the aisles, fat men in snap-brimmed hats splashing beer and mouthing as they ogled her, young languid seducers verbally stripping her, muttering to each other with effete expertise. What was wrong with them? What was wrong with *her*, that she had become so sensitive all of a sudden? There had been men like that in the house before now and it had never bothered her. She had been on her feet for fourteen hours that day, sixteen the day before; her legs and back ached and her head ached, her eyes were bleary and her throat raw. They didn't care: none of them cared. All they wanted was diversion, titillation.

Sweeping off her hat she walked to the centre of the stage and finished the final chorus, shouting it out at them, galloping the seven-man orchestra along. A section of the audience half-heartedly tried to join in the chorus but Mirrin gave them no chance. On the last note, she turned and flicked the fancy hat into the wings where Wilf, Ada, Pru and Blanche had gathered like mourners at a wake. She glanced at them, saw Wilf gesturing her off, then, with a defiant toss of her head, she drew in a deep breath, stuck her hands on her hips and stared hard into the stalls.

The hub-hub died a little. The clash of glasses and mugs in the larger of the saloon bars became quite audible.

Ignoring the cat-calls she made them wait.

When she was ready, she shouted. "What's wrong with you all tonight? Is it the rain? Have you never seen rain before? Don't it rain, then, in Bradford, in Bolton or Huddersfield? You think this is bad? I tell you, where I come from this is fine weather, a gran' day. Aye, listen, where I come from a little puff of wind an' a touch of the wet don't dampen our spirits. But we're the Scots. We're the hardy ones."

She was beginning, just, to catch them. She was angry. She remembered Sabbath afternoons on the corner of Duggan Street in Northrigg, and the square in Eastlagg and the mouth of the yard at the *Lantern* in Blacklaw itself, with Christy Moran egging her on and all the hot tumble of words that had come to her then, the clichés that she had learned from pit-boot politicians, from her father.

"Listen," she shouted. "Hear that rain? Hear it?"

They listened. Even the swillers and swains paused to cock their heads and listen to the batter of the waves on the piles and the rattle of the rain on the seaward gable.

"There's men out there in fishin' smacks, an' brigs an' barges, carryin' food for us, an' pig iron, an' coal. Coal. They call me the song-bird o'the north, but back home where I come from, I'm no song-bird; I'm a duck, a seagull."

Some folk sniggered, but not many.

"I splashed in the mud while I learned my trade. Aye, an' coal was my trade then, not singin' naughty songs," Mirrin cried. "*You work with cotton, you work with lead: you tear your hands on the bobbin an' thread.* Know that one, do you? I'll teach you another one. I'll sing you one now that tells you what it was like for me. Ach, I was no pet canary then, no beguilin' witch. I was a collier's daughter, an' m'Daddy was killed in the mine."

Her voice was harsh and grating. At first, she did not pander to the sentiment in the song. She sang it unaccompanied, as if it was a marching hymn, a rally cry, flat and hard and full of bitterness. She stood on the apron with the gaudy desert backcloth behind her, the lights still blazing down, the expensive dress clinging to her, and she sang them the one song she had never sung before, except softly to herself when she walked the roads across the Border and was full of sad regret.

The extravagant motions which Pru had taught her to augment tearjerkers were neglected. She kept her hands on her hips and her head high, defiant and challenging.

"*By the Clyde's bonny banks as I sadly did wander,*
Among the pit heaps as evening drew nigh,
I spied a young woman all dressed in deep mourning,
Weeping and wailing with many a sigh."

Apart from the singer's voice there was no sound in the hall. The words and the drumming of the rain and the raking of the wind merged and strengthened each other. Mirrin no longer thought of the effect on the customers. Once more, she tapped the deep hurt within herself. It was natural that she should dredge up this song, this real, plaintive cry that would silence an audience made up of men and women who, in one degree or another, had suffered, or had witnessed suffering, too.

If they were in no mood to be entertained, then at least they could be moved by an expression of shared emotions.

She sang:

"*The explosion was heard, all the women and children,*
With pale anxious faces made haste to the mine."

She could almost taste the coal dust in her throat, smell the stink of charred flesh and the thick sulphurous fumes of the choke-damp fire belching up from Lamont's pit.

She sang:

> "*When the truth was made known, the hills*
> *rang with their mourning,*"

They had brought up her brother Dougie, with his young, innocent face smashed to pulp by exploding chip-rubble; they had brought up her brother James with his hands blasted off and a shear-spike driven through his gut; they had brought up her father, alive, burned like an old pot. And rain had smeared their names on the list on the door of the managers' office and rain had dappled the cobbles and rain had filled the sky.

She sang:

> "*Shed a tear for the victims who'll never return.*"

The story was over. She had hardly been aware of the singing of it. When she was finished, there was silence still in the gilt and plush interior of the Grand Promenade, and then applause. Nobody whistled; nobody cheered or shouted. They applauded, and applauded, and many of them wept.

Mirrin looked up through her own tears. In the gloom under the gallery she could see the gaslamp at the entrance to the bar, and the crowd of men there, young men, the most of them, craftsmen and clerks, soldiers and tradesmen, their class putting them a little apart from the men she had sung of, hard-bitten colliers who crawled underground and maybe once in all their lives, if they were lucky, got away from the shadow of the winding towers to glimpse the sea and smell the salt wind clean along the coast.

In the stalls, an old woman wept unashamedly, and hugged her grandson to her. It was no ersatz music-hall heart-rending ditty that she had treated them to but a whiff of the real world, the actuality of Blacklaw and of Grossby and a thousand towns where work was all and masters ruled over men.

She was drained now, not as she'd been at Christmas back in the Civic Hall, but truly drained. She would not do it again; never again. She had used up the source within her. Tomorrow, she must be flighty and gay once more. She hoped that the sun would shine to aid the transition.

They were still applauding.

Mirrin scanned the circle, the sweep of faces, hands pale in the gloaming above the pepperpot lamps.

When she saw him she could not believe her eyes.

He was standing by the scroll at the side of the circle where the aisle swept down to the rectangular rail: *his* face, drawn and shadowed, and *his* manner, that quiet, watchful manner, like the time he had come to her from between the sheds on the day of the tragedy and offered her sympathy. She had rejected him then.

No, Mirrin shouted soundlessly. No. It *can't* be Houston.

I've worked myself into hysteria.

It isn't him.

Then Wilf was by her side. She was confused, disorientated. Wilf had one of her hands and Ada the other. All three were bowing. Wilf was making her take a call as if the whole performance had been planned in advance as part of the Talboys' Surprise Package for Wet Summer Nights in Beale.

"Are you all right?" Wilf whispered out of the corner of his mouth. "You look terrible."

"Aye, I'm . . ."

"Bow, an' get off, luv. Leave it to us now," Wilf said.

"I . . ."

"Take a breather, Mirrin," Ada murmured. "We'll pick them all up again, never fear."

Mirrin staggered back into the wings.

Wilf was making one of his little speeches. She knew that she had left them a difficult task. But, a moment later, Blanche passed her, then Pru, and a little after that as she leaned against the wing post, her heart pounding, she heard the strains of 'Paddle Your Own Canoe' start up from the orchestra trough.

She moved away, drenched in sweat, stifled by the theatre trappings, out of the rear door on to the narrow area of planking reserved for the artistes.

Rain streaked the lamps along the promenade. The crests of the big combers were faintly phosphorescent, huge and surgingly powerful, rolling in from the dark to swarm and seethe against the wrought-iron stanchions and swallow up the shingle.

Quickly the night air's turbulence and the activity of the sea calmed her and brought her down to earth again. Her dress was wet. It would require to be dried, cleaned and ironed before tomorrow evening's show.

Tomorrow's evening show. The thought did not stimulate her. She was beset by the incredible vividness of her vision of Lamont there in the circle. Some man who resembled him, no doubt; a trick that her imagination had played on her, a penalty, perhaps, for opening memories of Blacklaw like a blocked-up seam.

No it could not be Houston. But the rationalisation did not still her longing to be with her coalmaster once more, even to be home in Blacklaw and thole the family's crises as they came.

A house becomes a home when a child is in it: while Flora Stalker whole-heartedly approved of the sentiment, there were times that summer when she suspected that it had been coined by some spinster lady who had never personally experienced the disruption that a baby can cause to domestic routine. Not that wee Neill was not a joy and deserving of every minute devoted to his welfare, but the round of feeding, washing and changing, added to the fact that both his Auntie and his Gran' were working women, took its toll of peace and quiet. It was only in the last hour of the day, long past bedtime, that Flora and Kate were able to snatch a few minutes of relaxation together by the hearth. Even then their hands were not idle.

Neill was a bonny child, his features, though decidedly Stalker, disarmingly softened by fair curling lashes and the bluest of blue eyes. Flora had shown little or no curiosity about his mother, though Kate had told the older woman all that had happened in Edinburgh, quite enough to expose Drew's callousness to the poor highland girl who had died. It was too sore a subject for discussion.

Flora held up the cotton cut which she had scissored from an old sheet to add to Neill's collection of nappies.

"How one wee scrap of a lad can make so much work, I don't know."

"Don't blame the lamb," said Kate. "All your boys were the same: spoiled."

"I'm not spoilin' him, am I?"

"It's hard t'avoid it," said Kate. "I suppose when he's a bit older, it'll be me that has to give him a lick wi' the strap when he needs it."

"He'll not need it," said Flora. "He's an angel, that's what he is."

The wet nurse had made her last visit over an hour ago, and the infant lay sound asleep in the wooden cradle that Alex Stalker had made for his first son almost thirty years ago. It had done Trojan service since then, that strong well-balanced piece of carpentry, and all the Stalkers, save Drew, had slept in it during infancy. Being a twin, Drew had been obliged to grant the use of the cradle to Betsy, and had been bedded in a dressing table drawer instead.

Flora folded the blanket from Neill's sleeping face and returned to the big chair by the hearth to unpick the remains of an ancient knitted petticoat. With the best of the wool ripped out and washed it could be knitted up into socks and a coat for the baby, though it was a pity the colour was so awful. Plum was hardly fitting for a mite only months old.

"Maggie Fox's man's back at work," said Kate, glancing up from her sewing. "His broken head's mendin' fine. They were always a hard-headed bunch the Williamses."

"Have y'heard where Donald Wyld's gone?"

"Not a word," said Kate. "Not even Dunlop seems t'know an' he's usually full o'other folks' business."

"Where's it goin' t'end?" Flora asked. "With this Thrush man in charge."

"Not in closure, that's for sure," said Kate. "Thrush is far too determined ever t'see the Blacklaw colliery shut down."

"It's all Houston Lamont's fault," said Flora.

"Maybe it is." Kate knew better than to be drawn.

Flora said,"I've sometimes wondered if he an' Mirrin . . . ?"

"Honestly, Mam, that imagination of yours will bring trouble some day."

"But she . . . she got so much out of him, an' him the coalmaster too."

"She pricked his conscience, that's all."

"I never cared for her working at Lamont's house. Your father would never have approved."

"She did it for Drew, an' for the rest of us."

Flora sighed. "Still, she's well out of it, even if she is mixed up with theatricals now. The Lord knows what'll become of her."

"Mirrin'll always fall on her feet," Kate said. "Is Betsy comin' home tonight?"

"No, she's stayin' over in Hamilton."

"Again!" said Kate. "Who with this time?"

"Margaret-Anne, I think. There's a big prayer meetin' in the Hamilton hall. They're goin' t'that, she said."

"Our Betsy never struck me as the sort t'catch a dose of religion."

"Now, now, Kate," Flora admonished. "It doesn't do t'talk that way. Our Betsy's entitled t'worship as she chooses. Besides, it's better than flirtin' after men, or gettin' caught up with a fast crowd."

"She's changed."

"She's growin' up," said Flora. "It's natural she should want a bit of freedom."

A stinging remark came to Kate's tongue but she resisted the temptation to blurt out her suspicions. She had met Margaret-Anne Potter, another employee of Dalzells', two weeks ago and Margaret-Anne had been decidedly cagey about her friendship with Betsy and their sudden burgeoning interest in religion.

Kate said, "Did y'see the 'beauty hint' Betsy's got pinned t'the mirror in her room?"

"Aye," said Flora, chuckling. "Spread bacon fat on a linen cloth and tie it up your jaws. Can y'imagine any sane woman goin' t'bed of a night in that state. Her man would have a fit."

"Society ladies do it," said Kate. "It's a cure for a double chin."

"Any fat I've got spare will go for fryin' an' not for plasterin' on my face." Flora paused, however, and, setting down the coils of wool, tapped the back of her hand under her throat. "Anyhow, I haven't got a double chin, have I?"

"Well, not much of one, Mam," said Kate.

Frowning anxiously, Flora said, "Have I? Even the start o'one?"

"In a woman of your age, it's . . ."

"*My age?* What d'y'mean, girl? My age, indeed!"

"Well, you're not exactly a spring chicken, Mam."

"I'm not that old."

Kate said, "Well, Willy Kellock seems t'think you're young enough at least."

Flora Stalker busied herself with the petticoat on her lap again, her big thick fingers scrambling at the skeins.

"I'm not daft, Mam," Kate said. "I've known why the wee man drops in here of a night when the last round's done on the van."

"He comes for a cup o'tea, that's all."

"He's got better quality tea in his caddy at home, I'll wager," said Kate. "I think he comes for your company."

"He's . . . he's lonely."

"Aye," said Kate. "An' on the lookout t'do somethin' about it, if I'm not mistaken."

"I will not hear a word against Mr. Kellock. He's been very generous t'me; a woman couldn't wish for a more considerate employer."

"He'll maybe not be your employer for long, Mam."

"I doubt if Mr. Kellock would pay me off. I give him his moneysworth."

"I'm not thinkin' of you bein' paid off."

"Kate, I find this conversation . . . most . . . indelicate."

"Willie fancies you, Mam," Kate said. "He's a perfect gentleman, an' he's kind an' considerate. All that's true. After all, what's the harm in it?"

"What reason have you . . . ?"

"The casual calls; the cups o'tea; the attentions — I'm not blind, Mam."

"No! Well!" muttered Flora. Her embarrassment was acute, and girlish. "Is it . . . wrong, Kate?"

"Never in this world," said Kate, reaching forward to pat Flora's hand reassuringly. "If Mr. Kellock *has* any intentions, I'm quite sure they're most honourable."

"I . . . I wouldn't want you t'think badly of me, Kate."

"I think you're a treat," said Kate. "An' I can't blame the bakerman for gettin' a glint in his eye when he looks at you."

Flora blushed again.

"The point is, d'you like him?" Kate asked.

"Aye, I must confess I like him fine."

"Then there's no need t'blush."

"But it hardly seems right at my age."

"At any age, Mam, a bit of affection is not t'be ignored."

"I wonder if . . ."

"Well," said Kate, "we'll just have t'wait 'till William plucks up his courage, won't we?"

"Oh," said Flora Stalker, shocked. "I would never dare consider that it might come t'that."

"But if it did, would you have him?"

"Aye, I think I would," Flora Stalker said, without the least trace of hesitation.

Six

The storm had deposited veils of salt on all the windows of the sea-facing saloons, opaque screens behind which the bay glittered green and white in the sunshiny breeze that blew in from Cork and marched the waves in slanting droves up on the Lancashire shore. Wisely, Wilf Talboys defied Ockram's demand for a continuance of the nerve-racking regime of show after show. After that tormented Tuesday night's performance, Wilf cut back to a standard four, allowing his brave little troupe to rest and store energy for the patrons who had paid good money to share the artistes' cheerful vitality.

Mirrin's contribution to the morning hour was reduced to a single twenty-minute sketch. The children loved her as much as the adults who accompanied them but, being discriminating customers only to a degree, the boys and girls did not object to a limited appearance; the more so as Mirrin had equipped herself with a variety of interesting props, including a horse on wheels, built by the resident stagehands, which trundled across the stage with its ears and tail flapping, and even appeared to eat peanuts from its owner's hand. She enjoyed the morning appearance, when she was fresh and responsive to the youngsters' unabashed delight at her clownish antics.

By eleven-fifteen her stint on stage was over, the grease wiped from her face, her costume hung away neatly on the rack. Then she would sally into the smaller of the tearooms, drink tea and eat a Paris bun to keep her going until one o'clock luncheon in Nixon's dining room. With the others still in the theatre, Mirrin usually took her morning refreshment alone, or as alone as her admirers allowed her to be. There were many men in Beale, not all bachelors either, who would have intruded on her privacy if she had given them token encouragement. As it happened, however, that Thursday a race meeting in Fridswith had drained Beale of most of its sporting gentlemen and Mirrin was alone at the marble table in the quietest corner of the light and airy room.

Off to her left the big brass urns chugged softly, punctuated by an occasional rattle of cups and saucers or the hiss of a mineral water being opened. A dozen or so ladies and elderly gentlemen drank tea and talked, mulled over the latest journals or wrote their postcards to friends still stuck in humdrum towns and smokey cities. There was a feeling of ease in the air, not languid but gently effervescent, mimicking the mood of the weather.

Mirrin had lifted her second cup of tea, holding it, ladylike, with finger and thumb of her right hand while her left palm supported the saucer. She no longer had to consciously apply such niceties of etiquette. She was not so far removed from Mirrin Stalker of Blacklaw, however, that she could resist the sprinkling of soft yellow crumbs on her plate. Removing her glove she dabbed them up with her pinkie and licked them. She lifted the cup once more.

Behind the salt-speckled glass, the figure was bold in outline, but indistinct in detail. Mirrin made ready to angle her wickerwork chair and turn a haughty shoulder to the man who, she suspected, might be another Peeping Tom, one of several who goggled at her from time to time with all the insensitivity of spectators at a zoo. Out of the corner of her eye she watched a grey glove rise and rub the glass with a circular motion. A visible aperture appeared in the opaqueness, like an Eskimo's fishing hole in ice. Through that clear space, Mirrin glimpsed Houston Lamont's face, quite unmistakably, stooped to look in at her.

She put down her teacup, watching the man walk along the deck and enter the tall door. He looked straight at her, not smiling, paused to remove his hat and gloves, then came on, walking between the tables with a careful, determined tread, until he stood at Mirrin's side.

The spare lines of his features gave him an unexpected hardness. Lowered lids and compressed lips seemed more suited to a person bent on vengeance rather than reconciliation.

"Houston." Mirrin resisted the impulse to rise. She was no longer a servant. She was lady enough to deserve his respect, especially so far from Blacklaw, especially as *he* had sought *her* out. "Houston, this is such a pleasant surprise!"

She offered her hand. He took it, raising it to his lips. The formal affectation was at odds with the emotional intimacy of their last meeting. Even at that precise moment of reunion, Mirrin sensed in her heart that the love she had once entertained for this man had altered and, in changing, had diminished in intensity. From the first she was gentle with him, but cautious of the effect of time and the whirlygig of circumstances upon them both.

"I knew that you were in Beale," he said. "I had to see you."

"Do sit down, Houston," Mirrin said, pleasantly. "Would you care for tea?"

"No, thank you."

"At least sit yourself," Mirrin said. "I find it rather dauntin' to have to look up at you."

Stiffly, the coalmaster seated himself. He was tense too, almost trembling.

"You look well," he said.

"I'm in the best of health, thank you," Mirrin said. "How long have you been here?"

"A day or two," Houston said. "I've been travelling, you see."

"Really! Abroad?"

"I spent two weeks in the Low Countries, but this past fortnight I've been visiting mines and pits in Lancashire and Yorkshire."

"You haven't become an Inspector for the Queen, I hope?" said Mirrin, jestingly.

Houston took her seriously. "No, I have no qualification for that post, even if I wished to obtain it," he said. "I have been examining those pits which have adopted the use of advanced machinery, particularly cutters and steam-pump ventilators."

"I gather Blacklaw colliery is weathering the slump, then?"

"As well as can be expected," said Houston. "Are you not in correspondence with your mother and sisters?"

"I've had the occasional line from Kate," said Mirrin. "She told me about your sister. I'm so sorry, Houston. I hope Dorothy suffered no pain."

"She simply drifted away from me," Houston said. "It was a mercy, I suppose. She was virtually a prisoner in that upstairs room. Barred windows, and . . . However, she is well out of it, Mirrin. She asked for you shortly before she died. She always thought of you — as I did."

Mirrin did not reply. There was nothing to say. Houston understood that there had been affection between his sister and herself, that it was not lack of love, or even of respect, that had broken their relationship.

Now, hesitating only for an instant, Houston Lamont said, "I have missed you, Mirrin. In months I've thought of nothing but the brief period we shared together."

The speech was sincere, yet bewildered, as if, now that he was face to face with her once more, Houston could not quite reconcile memory with reality. Indeed, she had changed. She was a fashionable young lady now.

Confirming the feeling, he said, "I can hardly believe that it's you."

"Would you have preferred it, Houston, if I'd been wearing my black serge hand-me-down overcoat?"

"Don't reprimand me, Mirrin, please. I had to come here. Don't you understand? There's nothing for me in Blacklaw."

"There's the pit, the mansion — and your wife, Houston."

"The pit is in the best of hands . . ."

"That's not what I heard."

"Thrush is a clever manager."

"Clever enough to usurp Donald Wyld."

"You can know nothing of this, except by hearsay."

Mirrin nodded. "That's true, Houston. Besides, Blacklaw is far off. Look out there at the sea. Isn't it pretty?"

"The mansion is no longer home to me," Lamont went on relentlessly. "After Dorothy's death, there was nothing left. Nothing."

"And your wife?"

"Pah! Mirrin! Do you expect me to lie? You know the truth on that score better than anyone alive. Edith may have the house, aye, and the damned pit too. All I want is my freedom."

"Freedom is not so easily come by, Houston," Mirrin said. "I've found that out the hard way, believe me."

"Very well: not freedom then. All I want is to be with you again."

Mirrin was even more apprehensive than before. There had been nothing flighty in her love for the coalmaster, no self-seeking. But his emotional intensity had increased and she was afraid of being engulfed in the torrent of feeling that flooded from this man.

"Come with me, Mirrin."

"Come where?"

"Anywhere."

"Walking, do you mean? I have a performance at . . ."

"Damn your performance." The surly fury in his face startled her. "*Come with me.*"

"I'm not your servant now, Houston," Mirrin retorted. "I'd ask you to remember that."

He drew himself together. "Yes, Mirrin. I . . . I apologise. It's just that . . . that I have been so . . . so long alone." He managed a smile of sorts: it had no warmth in it, only a wryness that indicated a bitterness so incredibly fixed that Mirrin acknowledged it as an indelible facet of the man. "Will you walk with me? Will you, please, take lunch with me?"

"My . . . my friends are expecting me."

"Mirrin, please: please, my love."

"I'll leave a note for them," she said. "But I must be back at the theatre by half past two, no later."

"My hotel is not far away, at the Cornville end of Beale."

"Which hotel, Houston?"

"The Park."

"Ah, yes," said Mirrin. "The Park."

Houston may pretend to have appeared casually in Beale, though he made no bones about his motive for coming to the resort, but in selecting the Park Hotel up back of the Cornville promenade, he had shown a certain wiliness that was not typical of him. The Park had a reputation. It was luxurious enough, very luxurious, in fact, and expensive; but it was not the sort of place that a single young lady would, or should, go with a gentleman, not even for luncheon. It was a place where 'arrangements' were brought to fruition. The management had perfected discretion disguised as courtesy, so that the most debased harlot in

Lancashire could be sure of an unctuous welcome, provided she dressed to the nines, kept her voice down, and sailed in on the arm of wealth.

"How did you come to choose the Park, Houston?" Mirrin asked, as she gathered her handbag and gloves.

"I asked a station porter for his recommendation."

"I see," said Mirrin.

"It seems a very comfortable establishment. The chef is reputed to be French."

"If you have no objection, Houston," Mirrin said, taking his arm, "I would prefer to eat in English style, at least at luncheon."

"Where do you suggest?"

"The White Hart is more convenient."

"For the theatre, you mean?"

"Aye, for the theatre."

"Very well."

"I'll leave a message with the stagehand to tell my friends not to expect me for lunch."

"But you do intend to return by half past two, do you?"

"Certainly, Houston," Mirrin said. "That's the time of my next 'shift', you see."

In marriage, Mirrin had noticed, physical passion often burned off quickly, leaving affection and tenderness as a residue and, sometimes, precious little of those honest qualities. In her affair with Houston Lamont, however, it seemed that the love between them had condensed to a raw, almost painful hunger on the coalmaster's part, an appetite for something beyond sexual satisfaction, for a form of communion that could never be grasped, a longing that could not be appeased by love-making.

Mirrin was reminded of the tales Houston had told her of his family, of the pride and the passions that were in them, a kind of possessive madness that had driven some Lamonts to despair before now and had tainted the survivors and inheritors with the stigma of power, and an urge to treat fate like a caged beast, brutally setting out to tame it, and their own pagan natures, in face to face confrontation, time and time again.

It was her task during those preliminary meetings to reduce the overpowering desperation that was in the man, to stabilise his feelings for her into some recognisable facsimile of the love they had once shared, illicitly, in the mansion in the oaks. Had the fillip of deceit been essential to that love, the girl wondered, or had she merely been too immature to uncover the immaturity in him? The authority of his position in Blacklaw as owner, emperor and lord of the little town, had that been the main source of his attraction? No, she could not believe it. The memories were too sweet, too soft, to suit the changes that had taken place in their lives and characters. If, subconsciously, Lamont sought for a doom as thunderous and outright as his ancestors had fashioned for themselves, then she wanted no part of it.

Oddly, now that she was with him again, she loved him less than she had done in parting and during the eventful months of their separation. Perhaps that was a natural transition for a young woman. It did not seem proper in a mature man, though, a man of such authority as the coalmaster of a thriving policy.

Even as she allowed Houston to court her, forced him to restrain his ferocious desire to possess her, Mirrin experienced a faint wistful regret that she had given up the tinker lad, airy Tom Dandy, without sharing his bed. That relationship should have been purged of romance by the sweat and awkwardness of fulfilment, in physical union. If Tom had sought her out here in Beale, she would have been better pleased. Tom was a traveller, moving out of himself in a search not for cure but for happiness. Tom would have fair enjoyed himself in Beale. He would have made a fine escort for a music-hall queen, in that small town. But it was not Tom Armstrong that drifted into Lancashire that summer, it was Houston Lamont. There was no signal drift in him. He had a purpose, a fixed, dogged purpose — and she, at that period, was afraid of purposes.

It was Sunday before she allowed him to take her to luncheon to the snug dining room of the Park Hotel. She made no great show of resistance, nor had she kept Houston's presence secret. She had changed her style hardly at all, going through with her daily routine of walks upon the promenade, tea at the pier, rides upon the sand, an early morning bathe. Though Houston accompanied her, he did not join in. He remained aloof from all her attempts to make him forget himself, to heal the wounds that he seemed to regard as his due, as a soldier invalided out of war must wear his excuses boldly. She introduced Houston to the Talboys and Pru, to Ockram, to the friendly Nixons. She persuaded him to dine with them, early, at the Lucia Street hotel.

In company, Lamont was formal and courteous but reserved and disapproving. Mirrin could understand his priggishness. This pleasurable world was new to him. If only he would allow himself to accept each day as it came. But it was not in him. He thought only of the moment when he would recapture the love that had been. And yet, Mirrin knew, that kind of love had gone and could never be recalled. If only Houston would realise that it must be shaped anew, in another form. But he resisted change, resisted light-heartedness. He even resisted her.

Mirrin sensed that Houston *was* doomed, fated to suffer grievous disappointment. To delay that dreadful moment of disillusionment she held back, until there was no longer a point to it and she too sought for something, *some* echo of the warmth that had been theirs back in Blacklaw, in the winter of '74.

In the afternoon, when the whole town was out and about in the sunshine, Mirrin and Houston Lamont retired to the room on the Park's second floor, a room dominated by a huge brass-knobbed bedstead, a room curtained, shuttered and overly warm, a room designed for a single purpose.

Lamont was not rough with her. He had not so far forgotten himself as to demand a response as fervid as his own. At the last he was in awe of Mirrin's beauty, the warmth which she, in honesty, gave in response to his need. His gauntness made him seem less strong than the men she remembered. For the first time she was conscious of the difference in age between them, the twenty years that, in love, seemed as naught, but on the periphery of love cast certain doubtful shadows.

Houston's release was sudden. It exhausted him. He drew back from her, sliding up the quilt to cover them as if he was ashamed of their nakedness, hers as much as his own. He had not been demanding. She had found no real pleasure in the act, and he was aware of it, as he would have been of failure. It was, she supposed, failure of a sort. Turning, she put her arms around him and drew him close. But he would have none of that, not even at that most intimate moment, the moment he had hungered for and dreamed of for many months.

"Houston," she said. "Is it so different for you?"

"It appears to be for you," he replied.

He did not brush her away, propped on the crushed pillow, arm raised to shield his eyes, though there was no brightness in the room, only the dusty suffusion of sunlight through the brocade-like curtain. Far, far off were the sounds of children shrieking in delight at some piece of play upon the apron of sand under the wall of the Cornville promenade. He did not respond to her caress.

"You are . . . are easier now," he said, hoarsely.

Mirrin sat up, the quilt slipping from her shoulder.

"Easier, Houston? What d'you mean?"

"Have you . . . borne a child?" The abrupt question was shockingly explicit. She pulled away from him.

She had supposed that he had evaded the issue of the baby out of delicacy. Perhaps he had simply not cared enough to indulge in the commonest of street gossip. Though Houston was entitled to know whose child it was — after all he was still Drew's patron to the tune of twenty pounds each year — she had judged his silence wrongly. In an instant it all became clear, the maliciousness, the resentment and the serpentine confusions of feeling which that bastard infant had raised not only in Blacklaw but in the coalmaster.

"You think the baby's mine, do you?"

"It is possible, Mirrin. In fact, it is probable. Come now, who other than a Stalker would find adoption in the Stalkers' house?"

"Have you spoken to them, to Kate or my mother?"

"Of course not."

"Then who told you? Edith, that damned vindictive wife of yours? Or was it this new man, this Thrush person? Is he the kind that carries tales?"

"*Is* it your child?"

"Do you *think* it is?"

"I . . . I don't know."

Mirrin swung herself from the bed. She had shed her night-clothes. Nude, she stood before him, saying, "Look at me, Houston. Look at my body, at my breasts and my belly. Have I given birth to a baby?"

He glanced at her slyly, then looked away towards the curtained window.

Mirrin leaped on to the bed. Taking his chin in her hands she wrenched his face towards her. "You've *made* your inspection, Mr. Lamont: *now, what's your opinion?*"

"I owe you an apology, Mirrin."

"Is that all you can say? Is that how you talk t'me, Houston, as if I was a committee in the managers' office? Though, by God, you'd never apologise t'them, now I think of it. Tell me, tell me in plain guid Scottish tongue — did you think I was wicked enough t'get myself with child only weeks after I left you?"

"I thought . . . I could not be sure that . . ."

"*Houston, look at me.*"

"No, I . . . I *hoped* it might be mine." He reached for her then, even as she sought to slip from him, and hugged her tightly to his chest. "Yes, that's the God's truth of it, my love. I *hoped* that the baby might be yours — and mine."

Mirrin sagged against him. She felt a great pity for him, an overwhelming sympathy such as she would have felt for anyone so deprived of love that he or she would disregard the mainstays of common sense by which the world wagged and by which the social order, in Blacklaw and out, was rudely maintained. In his eagerness to firm the slender bond between them, in his desire to spawn something that was his own, not just an heir but a son upon whom he could lavish love, Houston had plunged down into fantasy.

Softly, now, gently, her mouth against his cheek, Mirrin said, "Did you not know that it couldn't be, Houston? You *must* have known."

"But I continued to hope, Mirrin. Oh, God, how I hoped."

It did not matter to him who had fathered the child. All that had tormented him was the illogical aspiration that he had planted a son in her womb. He could no longer refute reality.

She said, "Houston, I've been with no other man since you."

"But you must . . . must . . ."

"Must have been tempted, d'you mean? Aye, perhaps a little, but not enough. I may be a performer now, Houston, but I'm no slut. It isn't like you think with theatricals."

"*No* other man?"

"None," said Mirrin. "I've known no other man but you."

"Do you love me, Mirrin?"

She could not afford to hesitate. She did not know herself if pity was the beginning of love, or the withered leaf on the tree of her girlhood, a weightless memory of the first spring her heart had ever known.

"Yes, Houston, I love you."

Stirring, he kissed her hair, then her cheek and finally crushed his mouth against her lips. The hunger that had been dormant in her was released, and she shifted, rolling from him to lie on the quilt by his side.

It was then, once, as it had been before. They were truly lovers again in the fleeting and forgetful warmth of that Sabbath afternoon in a trysting hotel in Beale.

It would have been pointless to try to hide the affair from the Talboys. They had seen enough of life not to judge Mirrin harshly. Indeed, Pru and Ada were pleased for her and the acknowledgment that she had a lover dissolved the last barriers between her and Blanche. Once it was clear that it was no overnight infatuation and that Mirrin had no immediate intention of 'running off' with the fellow, even Wilfrid became an unwitting conspirator by ensuring that she had some time to herself.

It was Houston's plan to take a cottage in the area so that he might spend as much time as possible with Mirrin. But no such rental was to be found within ten miles of the resort at the height of the August season. At last a compromise was reached, a programme, as it were, which permitted Mirrin to retain her good name and gave Houston as much of her time away from the theatre as was possible. She continued to lodge with her friends at Nixons', but the Park Hotel saw much of her in its dining room and foyer, for she conducted the relationship with Houston without peripheral deceits. Houston hired a gig for their exclusive use. Mirrin reciprocated by taking the lease of a box for every Owls' House, though she did not feel in the least slighted when Houston missed a performance: the musical hall was not really to his taste and there was in him a certain jealousy of the young woman's popularity.

Four days after their first afternoon of love-making, Houston returned, over lunch in the White Hart, to the subject of the Stalkers' foundling.

"Mirrin, I hesitate to raise the subject, but . . ."

"The baby, d'you mean, Houston?"

"Yes," he said. "Is it of the Stalker blood?"

"Have you heard no talk at all in Blacklaw?"

"It's generally accepted in the village that he is yours."

"I suppose that's to be expected."

"Don't you object to such slander?"

She shrugged a little. "It suits the purpose, I suppose. It doesn't do me any harm."

Houston said, "Is your brother Andrew the father?"

"Yes."

"And the mother?"

"She died in childbed."

"Were they . . . were they married?"

"No," said Mirrin. "I'm not being defensive, Houston. But I have very little information about the affair."

"I didn't think that your brother had it in him."

"Had what in him?" asked Mirrin, raising an eyebrow.

"Come now, Mirrin," Houston said. "I am his patron. I do have a certain interest in the lad."

"It was . . . a certain hot-bloodedness, I suspect," said Mirrin. "If I know Drew he'll have learned his lesson."

Houston said, "He has learned his lesson."

"What do you mean?"

"I wrote to Gow Havershaw enquiring after my protégé's welfare," Houston said. "Setting aside his indiscretion, it seems that your brother is forging ahead on all fronts. He is a prize student — Havershaw even sent me the class marks — and he is also the confrère of a most influential bunch."

"Really!"

"You don't seem greatly interested, Mirrin?"

"I'm not," Mirrin said. "As far as I'm concerned Drew can stew in his own juice."

"Do you regret our bargain?"

"I . . . no, I don't regret it, Houston. I'm only sorry that it was necessary. Drew wasn't the cause of our parting."

"You're free of him now, Mirrin," Houston said. "I'm convinced that your brother is more than capable of looking after himself. He has no need of you."

"He'd have been in a right pickle, though, if Kate hadn't come along and taken the baby off his hands. Does Havershaw not know of it?"

"Difficult to tell," said Houston. "I question if he does. He's the type of person who could hardly resist dropping a sly hint. No, my guess is that Drew's managed to bury the matter completely."

"You could pick a better expression, Houston. He buried the child's mother, you know."

"You are strange, you Stalkers," Lamont said.

"I don't think we're strange at all."

"I meant no offence, Mirrin, but how did you, for example, come to be involved with the music-hall?"

"I've told you that tale already."

"That's not what I meant," said Houston. "I meant, how is it that fate, destiny, call it what you will, doles out such richness for the Stalkers, not for others of that ilk?"

"My father dinned it into us that independence of spirit is the most important thing a man — aye, and a woman — can acquire. Nobody in this life is going to look out for you, Houston. You must look out for yourself. Seize every chance."

"But you, and your sister and your mother, you have so much . . . caring in you for others."

"Do we?"

"You care for me, Mirrin. You cared for Dorothy. You cared so much for Dorothy, in fact, that you jeopardised your own happiness for her sake."

"Aye, an' little good it did the poor woman in the end."

"I'm not at all sure, Mirrin, that the exchange was not worth it; that Dorothy was not the better for those few brief months of happiness before her illness and her death."

"But . . . ?"

"I had to come here, Mirrin," Lamont said. "I am — I was — being destroyed."

"By your wife, d'you mean?"

"By myself."

"And now?"

"I want to stay with you."

"I don't think you really mean that, Houston."

"But I do, my darling: I do."

"You want me to be with you?"

"It's the same thing, is it not?"

"No, it's not. I have . . . commitments here."

"Honour them."

"Houston, I don't want to desert the Talboys."

"Then I'll . . . I'll simply tag along."

"It won't work. You must see that. Really you want me to come with you. If you don't, you will — and soon, I fancy."

"There's nothing for me in Blacklaw."

"Aye, but there is," Mirrin said.

"Then come back with me."

"To be installed in a house in Hamilton, or Glasgow? To be idle all day, to wait for you? I'm not cut out to be a mistress."

"I'll sell the pit to Edith. We'll marry, you and I."

"It's fine to sit here in Lancashire and say that, Houston, but you know it would not be possible. In six months, in a year you would regret your decision."

"I hate Blacklaw and all that it stands for."

"But you must go back. Oh, not tomorrow, or next week, but eventually you must go back. What about the new programme, the machinery?"

"Thrush's scheme, not mine," said Lamont, vehemently. "I hate him, too, and all that he stands for."

"I think," said Mirrin quietly, "that maybe you envy him a wee bit too."

"Envy Thrush? Why?"

"Because he has no heart."

Houston smiled at her, crookedly, but she could tell that her assessment had struck home.

It was the first of many such discussions, each one more bitter, more anxious than its predecessor. Soon, Mirrin knew, they would be so caught up in the future that all pleasure would go out of the present. Even at that stage in the relationship, she was honest enough to realise that Houston and she must part. In every moment of their communion now, in the bedroom and out of it, that sense of impending loss tinged her attitude and made her defensive. For his good, as well as her own, she would persuade him that for the time being they must follow their own separate [redacted]

Blanche said, "Do you love him very much, Mirrin?"

"I did."

"But you don't any more?"

"I am fond of him," Mirrin said. It was late and she was too tired to become involved in lengthy confidences with Blanche.

"Will you go away with him?"

"No."

"My Mam thinks you will. But Aunt Pru's wagering you'll stick with us."

"What do you think I should do, Blanche?"

"Go with him."

"At all costs?"

"I gave up *my* fellow, Mirrin. I will regret it all my life."

"Gave him up?"

"It was last summer." Blanche turned from the bedroom mirror, her hair spilling down her back, hairbrush poised. She was aware of herself, but the emotions at the root of her performance were genuine enough. "Last summer was my summer. His name is — was — Henry Essam. I met him in Marlingford. We stole a few brief weeks together. He wanted me to marry him and go to live with him in Birmingham."

"What does he do?"

"Henry's *quite* well off. He's a carpenter in his own right. His own shop. He has another shop in Marlingford; actually it's his brother who operates that one. Henry was down for the summer. He said that if I would marry him I might live in either town."

"But you didn't accept?"

"Father didn't approve."

"So you gave him up?"

"I wanted to run away to Birmingham with him but Henry wouldn't hear of it."

"Why ever not?"

"He said he had too much respect for me; he was afeared I might later regret my impetuosity. He wanted it to be square and above board, with Papa's approval. That's the kind of gentleman my Henry was. I'll never find another like him."

"I'm sure you will, Blanche."

"Sometimes I think he is suffering, too, my Henry, and that he'll come for me, just as your friend did. I look out into the stalls and pray that Henry will be there, come to take me away with him. But I fear he's found another girl to be his wife. It's five months since last I wrote to him and he has given no reply."

"Perhaps . . ."

"Mirrin, does it hurt to be loved?" Blanche asked suddenly.

"Hurt?"

"Does it cause pain?"

"Not much," said Mirrin. "If you truly love the man then it isn't pain at all, Blanche, only pleasure."

"But it's wrong to take pleasure that way, for a woman."

"Who told you that: not your Mam?"

"I love Henry, but I'm . . . I'm afraid of it."

"There's nothing to fear, Blanche, believe me."

Blanche returned to her combing. In the light of the oil lamp on the dressing table she looked pretty, yet faded, older than her years.

Matter-of-factly now, she said, "I think it's because I was afraid of marriage that I gave him up so easily. I should have defied Papa."

"Next time you'll know better, Blanche."

"If there is a next time."

"There will be," said Mirrin. "Believe me, luv, life is packed full of second chances. The trick is in knowing which is the right chance to take and just when to take it."

"Mr. Lamont: is he your second chance?"

"I can't answer that, Blanche."

"Won't you confide in me?"

"The truth is that I don't know myself," Mirrin said.

On the occasion of that particular Sunday night visit, Mr. William Kellock had attired himself in a smart navy pinstripe suit, a grey half-cock hat with a silk ribbon which exactly matched the colour of his new suede gloves. A nubby fold watch-chain curled from his buttonhole to his vest pocket and another, finer, chain draped his stomach, firmly anchoring a cluster of fobs and small tokens, memorabilia which he had acquired over the years. William might have appeared natty and pompous except for his armful of paper bags and white card boxes. Ducking under the lintel of the Stalker kitchen — though it cleared his hat by a good four inches — the baker went through a little juggling act with the assorted items and eventually spilled them on to the table cloth, only just avoiding destruction of the fairy cakes that Flora had slaved over that afternoon just to show Mr. Kellock that he wasn't the only one who could produce featherlight sponge mixture.

Given notice of his visit, Flora too had changed into her best dress and had even dug out an ornate brooch and clasp that had come down to her from her husband's mother and which she had seldom found an excuse to wear.

The fire was built up — though the weather was anything but cold — and the hob swept and the brass trim polished and the best plates taken from the top shelf of the corner dresser and, in general, the whole ceremony gone through with an assiduousness that made Kate wonder if Willie Kellock had been secretly knighted by the Queen for his contributions to the art of the crusty loaf.

In response to her mother's promptings Kate too had spent some time making herself 'decent' for the baker's visit. As she put the last touches to her hair, it did in fact occur to her that some kind of change was very much in the air and that this traditional, if rare, formality was a surefire sign that Willie could wait no longer.

Flora's behaviour confirmed Kate's suspicions, and Willie's tumbling arrival into the narrow house had all the fluster and nervousness of a younger swain about to bend his knee to a stern patriarch.

Composing herself, Kate rescued Mr. Kellock from the slough of embarrassment, by relieving him of his hat, gloves and all the gifts, piling the objects neatly on a vacant chair until such time as Willie saw fit to dispense his bounty. The baker got rid of them at once.

"Just a few trifling oddments," he said, with a stuttering chuckle. "Better than giving them to the horse, eh, Mrs. Stalker?"

"Thank you, Mr. Kellock."

"An' . . . an' a bone-ring for the babby in that box there, an' a wee something for you ladies."

"Most kind of you, Mr. Kellock," said Kate.

She was glad that Betsy was not at home; by this time her youngest sister would have assumed that expression of indulgent disdain which would surely be her reaction to the baker's onslaught on etiquette.

"You'll be about ready for supper, Mr. Kellock?" said Kate, since both Willie and her mother seemed incapable of intelligent utterance at that moment. They were seated now across the hearth from each other as if testing out the domestic position with caution.

Tonight Willie could not relax. He stared up at Kate and wrung his hands, saying, "Supper, Miss Stalker?" as if he had never heard the word before.

"Just a slice of ham and a wee bit cold mutton," Kate said.

"Oh! Aye! Supper! Please, Miss Stalker."

Kate put the filled kettle on the hob, then noticing Mam's flushed expression, said, "Maybe I'll . . . er, just pop down t'the corner for a breath of fresh air."

"What?" Mam said. "No!"

"Stay, please, Miss Stalker," said the baker with fluttering anxiety.

"Mr. Kellock, I'm not the one t'play gooseberry."

"Gooseberry? But . . . but, it's you I came t'see."

"*Me?*"

"Och, I didn't mean it t'come out like this." With a heavy sigh Willie resigned himself to brusqueness. "I wanted t'ask for your hand in marriage."

"*Me?*" said Kate again, utterly dumbfounded.

"Aye. Did y'not guess?"

"I . . . I thought . . ."

"You must've had some inklin', Kate?"

There was silence in the kitchen for a moment. Kate did not dare look at her mother. She groped for the kitchen chair and seated herself upon it. All along Willie's gentle wooing had been directed at her, not at Mam. She couldn't believe it.

Flora was first to recover. She gave no sign at all that she had been slighted. "Well, that's a surprise, Mr. Kellock. Though you're right: Kate hasn't been oblivious . . . t'your intentions. Have you, dear?"

"But Mam?"

Flora's expression was motherly and reassuring. "Let's all sit down at the table."

Willie Kellock's agitation had changed in tone. He cleared his throat. "How's the wee chap, then?"

"Fast asleep in the back room," said Flora. "It was a struggle t'get him down, as usual. He's as full of energy as a basket o' puppies."

"That's healthy for a growing bairn," said Willie, transferring himself from the fireside to the deal table and, out of habit, bending to inspect the fairy cakes with a critical eye. "Aye, these look nice an' light."

"Kate made them," Mam said.

Kate opened her mouth to protest at the lie, then closed it again. She could not be absolutely sure that her mother had not known all along of Willie's real matrimonial target. She busied herself preparing tea, let it infuse only for a moment then poured out cups for everybody. She put the cold meats on the table together with a loaf and fresh butter, then took her own seat, her back to the door. She had regained her composure. Her impulse now was to thank the baker for the compliment of his proposal, then firmly turn him down. It wasn't Kellock's fault that they — she at least — had misconstrued the source of his affections and jumped to the wrong conclusion. So it would be wrong, wrong and cruel, to hurt him. Fully aware that she had not given an answer she tried to appear genial but indecisive.

"As . . . as t'your proposal, Mr. Kellock . . ." she began.

"You'd better call me Willie, Kate."

"Aye, well, Willie, I'll have t'ask for time to consider it."

"Of course: of course." Delight at not being sent packing with a flea in his ear illuminated the baker's rubicund face. "Take all the time y'want, Kate. But . . . but there's somethin' I intended t'say before I got rushed into things." He darted a glance from Flora to Kate. "I have the very highest regard for both you ladies, an' you know how taken I am with the wee boy. If you'll do me the honour of becomin' my wife, Kate, I'll care for all of you and provide amply for all your needs, just as though you were m'own family."

There was no mistaking his sincerity.

Touched, Kate smiled shakily. "I'm . . . I'm grateful an' flattered Mr. Kel . . . Willie. I'll give the matter most serious consideration an' let you have an answer shortly. It's not that . . . that I don't like an' respect you in return, please understand. But . . ."

"No hurry: no hurry at all, lass," Willie assured her. He too seemed relieved that there would be a breathing space, a period of courtship during which he could impress her with his worthiness and enjoy the excitement, mellow though it was, of a second wooing.

Relaxing, the baker quickly steered conversation round to town gossip and chattered on about one safe subject after another. While Flora responded, Kate was much occupied with her own thoughts. It was something new to her to learn that she had attracted the attention, the love, of a man. Even if her suitor was nearly twice her age, it warmed her to realise that she was wanted. It was only the second time in her life that any man had asked her to marry him; the first one, ten years syne, had turned out to be a rogue just out for a bit of fun, who had a wife and bairns salted away in a hovel in Lanark. But there was no such dishonesty about Willie Kellock: he was as kind and honourable a man as she could hope to find in the whole county. After a while, she gave him her attention and joined in the general conversation until it was after midnight and the baker, used to an early bed, took his leave.

Kate saw him to the door. When she returned Mam had already begun to clear the table and wash up the willow pattern plates in the basin in the sink.

Lifting the drying cloth, Kate busied herself too.

"Well," she said at length, "that *was* a surprise."

"Was it not, now?" Flora said, without turning.

"I'm . . . I'm sorry, Mam. I wouldn't have hurt you for worlds. I thought . . . I thought it was you he wanted for his wife."

"I'm not hurt, Kate. Anyway, I should've had more sense at my age than t'think about another husband. No, the important thing is that you marry that man."

"You *want* me t'marry Willie?"

"He's fond of you, that's apparent."

"But I'm not in love with him."

"You don't even know the meanin' o'that word, Kate."

"Mam, that's unfair."

"A roof over your head, a fire in the grate an' a bite always on the table, those are more important things than love."

"But we have those things already."

"Aye, but for how long?" Flora swung round. "There's no security here, Kate. Aye, Lamont's made over the tenancy t'us, but who's t'say that he'll not take it into his head t'revoke it. Mirrin's not here now: she was always the bargainer, the one who could handle Lamont. Besides, you've heard how radically he's changed, how unreliable he's become this past year, especially since his sister died."

"Security, Mam? Is that a reason t'marry?"

"Reason enough, Kate. If Lamont throws us out, then where would we go, you an' Betsy an' me, not t'mention wee Neill?"

"It's Neill you're really thinkin' of, isn't it?"

"Aye, it is."

Kate sighed. It was too much for her. Once more she was being coaxed into accepting responsibility for the family. Not that she grudged them their share. Neill in particular had brought purpose back into her life. But sacrificing her freedom was quite another matter, the more so as they were struggling along comfortably enough on their own.

"Did you know that Willie Kellock was keen on me?" she asked.

"I . . . I knew he liked you, Kate."

"But you thought he intended you for his wife?"

"I did incline t'the opinion that he would propose t'me, Kate, not t'you."

"Would you have accepted him, Mam?"

"Aye."

"Why?"

"Because I like him."

"T'provide security for the rest of us?"

"That too, lass," Flora said. "It's all I can hope for at my age."

"But if not you — me?" Kate said. "D'you suppose that it's all up with me, too; that only a man like the baker, nice as he is, will have me now?"

"He's not that old," Flora said. "Willie'll make you a good home. He'll leave you comfortably off when he dies, you can be sure of that."

"An' children?"

"Children?"

"Bairns, Mam? Will he give me bairns?"

"Well, that's . . . that's not a decent question t'ask, Kate."

"Do you think I'm too far gone for that too?"

"Child-bearin's more difficult at your age."

"My age? I'm not yet thirty, Mam. I only *seem* old."

"I take it," said Flora Stalker, "that you're goin' t'reject Mr. Kellock's generous offer of marriage?"

"I don't know," said Kate. "Right now, I'm goin' t'my bed."

"Kate?"

"I promise I'll think about it, Mam, but don't badger me. If I decide t'take Willie Kellock for a husband then it'll be because I want to: not for you, nor Betsy, nor even for wee Neill."

"He's a good man, Kate."

"I know that: that's what makes it difficult."

"Would you rather he was wicked?"

"I'd rather he was younger, if you must know."

"Age has nothin' t'do with . . ."

"I'll be a widow at fifty, Mam, like as not, an' I've no hankerin' to spend my old age alone."

"What'll you tell him?"

"I'll give him an answer in my own good time."

Seven

THE GIG SAT high on its steel and leather springs, riding above all other transports except horse-omnibuses and the huge lumbering carts in which sea-food merchants of Deverham and Spearsbridge carried their wares to the railway at Beale for daily distribution into the hinterlands of Lancashire and Yorkshire. The promenade and coastal rides were crowded that fine August afternoon. A breeze had sprung up fresh and warm, chasing away the somnolent haze which had shrouded the wings of the bay since Sunday, imparting to the resort a brisk cheerful summery atmosphere which was much enjoyed by its holiday guests and the excursion intruders.

Mirrin and Houston sat side by side on the padded leather seat, the man with the reins held lightly in his brown hands, the woman with one hand raised to hold on her hat. The pace was hardly brisk now that the gig had entered the main stem of the town coming from Cornville into dense traffic at the pierhead and the picnic lawns where the hotels and boarding houses clustered on the hill among their massy shrubs and white iron railings.

The coalmaster and the music-hall performer had established a relationship as fragile as the sticks of spun sugar sold from the stalls along the front. At that particular moment, however, Mirrin was content to enjoy the ride, the vantage point, the warm breeze smelling of the sea. She had grown used to the attentions of the crowds, the turning of heads, the disapproving stoop of a wife's shoulders, the whispers of old maids and acid widows, the chirruping of the bolder bucks and apprentices in from Preston, or Bolton or Widnes, as she rode openly with her lover along Beale's most public thoroughfare. She waved to the pierrots setting up their benches on the sand. She waved to the juggler who had curtailed his act to catch a bite of dinner from a paper bag. She waved to the many friends she'd made in the town and to the many who waved to her or called out some jovial remark as the gig threaded haltingly through the other vehicles towards the Grand.

Houston, too, she thought, should be happy enough to seize the moment as it came, though the vulgar bustle of the holiday town was not his proper milieu. There were times when Mirrin had caught him with a brooding, almost hostile fire in his eyes as he surveyed the paddlers and the bathers, the picnickers, the canoodlers, the gamesters and the busy cross-section of England that came for a sniff of the briny and to inspect the bosom of the deep. It was clear that privately Houston did not approve. She wondered what his ideal haunt would be? A grouse moor in the Highlands, a boating holiday in Holland — very fashionable she'd heard — or a trek round the art treasures of France or Italy? Perhaps Houston had no taste at all for travel, other than for the purpose of business — or pursuit. His capacity for passive enjoyment of life's pleasures had always been thin; now it was almost non-existent. Only in the sanctuary of the Park's bedroom, with the drapes drawn against the light, did her lover cast off his burden of depression and become, in part, more like the man she remembered. After three weeks of his company, Mirrin sensed that his moodiness concerned her, though she had not the temerity to press him for reasons.

Look at him, even now, on this gay, light-hearted sort of day, his face bronzed, his health apparently restored, driving with a woman whom he professed to love — yet not here, not present, mentally far, far off in some sinister land of his imagination. Was it the past he longed for, a past that he had created out of the dull fragments of reality? Or did he — the thought made Mirrin shiver a little — did he in fact regret that he had ever come to love her, that they had ever met? How could that regret flourish here so far from Blacklaw's grim and reeking slag heaps, from mud and grime, the tar-black winding towers looming over the railway dumps? Was that, after all, Houston Lamont's only true domain? Had he at last proved the fact beyond doubt to himself?

"Come on, luv, give us a smile: just a little one," she said, putting her hand on his shoulder. "It's such a beautiful afternoon, and the luncheon, as always, was excellent."

"Yes."

"Is that all you can say? Yes?"

"I don't want you to go to the theatre this afternoon."

"Ah, so that's what's biting you, Houston. Well, I must."

"Stay with me."

"It's only a couple of hours."

"I would prefer you to be with me."

"And I would prefer to be with you."

"Then send a message; tell them you're unwell. Talboys will understand."

"I'm as fit as a fiddle, and Wilf knows it. He saw me at the morning show."

"I beg you, Mirrin, please stay with me?"

"Houston, I can't," she protested. "Look, if you like I'll see if I can call out of Friday's performance, the matinée. We could drive to the races. Are there races on Friday?"

"Today. I need you today."

"At twenty minutes to curtain: I'm not that callous."

"Only to me."

"If you had even asked me this morning . . ."

"You owe me one afternoon."

"I can't let Wilf and Ada down. It would mean so much bother for them, so much palaver."

"I see," Houston said. "Your loyalty to them supersedes your love for me. I think you are using me, Mirrin."

"How dare you say that?" Anger erupted in her. She flung herself from his side across to the opposite bench so that she could study his profile, seeking in his sour expression some clue as to the reason for this demanding outburst. Under the sun-tan his flesh was ashen, bruised shadows beneath his eyes, the sockets deep. He was, she realised, completely oblivious to Beale, concentrating only on achieving his desire. It was not unexpected. Sooner or later she had anticipated that he would test her feelings. But this method was crude with a cruel quality which swiftly changed her anger into fear. "What is it, dearest? What's wrong? You were so silent at lunch too. Are you ill?"

"This came."

Mirrin took the letter which Houston extracted from his coat ocket and held out to her. The envelope, she noticed, bore a awyers' seal on the left-hand corner.

"It was forwarded to me from Menzies Paton, my Glasgow olicitor," Houston explained. "Edith does not know my exact whereabouts."

"Do you wish me to read it?"

"Of course."

"Draw in the gig, Houston, there by the side of the square."

The letter was curt in the extreme. It said: "*It may interest you o know, sir, that Mr. Donald Wyld, lately of your employ, was killed utright during a roof fall in the Geddie Glen pit in Fife on Wednesday f last week.*"

Carefully Mirrin folded the letter and returned it to the envelope. She offered it to Lamont. The gig was now at rest, the horse assive, out of the mainstream of traffic.

"Donald Wyld — dead!" the wonan said softly.

"Do you see where he died?"

"Geddie Glen," said Mirrin. "Aye, I've heard of it. I thought he Inspectors had closed it down."

"A death trap," said Lamont. "He had been there only a week or two, apparently. It could not have been longer. A day or two, for all I know."

"Don't blame yourself, Houston."

"He was a good, loyal employee and my friend. I dismissed him for no reason."

"You told me he had resigned."

"He felt he could not work with Thrush."

"I see," said Mirrin. "Aye, it's a sad thing, right enough. There were few in Blacklaw had a real bad word to say about Wyld. Oh, they cursed him from time to time and blamed him for all the ills of the day, but they respected him nonetheless."

"And I killed him. He must have known how dangerous the Geddie pit was," Lamont said. "But for me, Wyld would still be alive."

"God, Houston, you're talkin' like a collier, not an owner. I've heard that selfsame thing said about you. Aye, many times. I've heard it said that you killed those folk, my own father and brothers among them, in the black March disaster."

"I . . . I was exonerated: from that crime, at least."

"Donald Wyld knew what he was doing," Mirrin told him. "You must exonerate yourself now, Houston."

Seagulls screamed overhead, swooping down from the roof of the Beale Town Hall towards the sea, a sign, so the fishermen said, that the tide had turned at that exact moment. The clock in the squat tower chimed a quarter.

"Death seems to dog my tracks," Lamont said. "I cannot shake it off."

The statement was incongruous, uttered here in the holiday streets in the bright sunlight.

"It's in the nature of things, Houston."

"My son Gordon, then Dorothy, now Donald Wyld."

"Thrush, and Edith are . . ."

"No, I cannot blame them. It's me. I am the factor, the cause. It's my coalpit, my business, my profit and loss account, my mansion; my damned town, come to that."

Mirrin sat quite still. Houston was sinking again into a morass of self-pity and guilt, into a moroseness close to mental illness. Speaking sharply now, she said, "Aye, it's the truth, Houston. You *are* the coalmaster. You can't escape it. At the root of it all you don't want to escape it. You shouldn't be here with me. You should be in Blacklaw. I've heard enough to realise that. As you say, it's *your* damned pit and *your* damned town. Damned or not, *you* must look out for it and not let a pipsqueak an' a dry-hearted woman make a game-board of it, aye, and of folks' lives."

"You wish me to go?"

"No, no, Houston. I'll not reject you. But I can't be in love with half a man."

"You've no right . . ."

"I have every right. I tell you, Houston, you'll not find what you seek with me, not here in Beale, or in Liverpool, or London, or in Timbuctoo."

"Only in Blacklaw, Mirrin: is that what you mean?"

"I . . . I must go to the theatre now."

"You refuse to stay with me this afternoon."

"We'll talk at length tonight."

"*Talk!*" Lamont exploded, viciously. "What's the point in *talking*. It comes down to this, if I return to Blacklaw, will you come with me?"

The clock hands showed ten minutes to three. Wilfrid and the others would be fretting now, already dressed for the opening curtain, daubed and powdered and agitated, perhaps even preparing to make dreaded last-minute changes to the programme.

The seats of the theatre would be filling, though there would be no sell-out today, not with such fine weather to keep people on the sands and the promenade. Even so, there would be some, a hundred perhaps, or even two hundred, in to rest their legs and enjoy the entertainment.

She said, "I was right, Houston. You do not want to be with me: you want me to be with you."

"Will you come home with me, Mirrin?"

"There's no place for me in Blacklaw, with you."

"Even if I . . . I sold the pit?"

"I'm not worth that, Houston. Besides, it would be capitulation, giving in, and that isn't in you. Aye, you might do it, rashly, but it would only sully our relationship ever after."

"Can I have no peace of mind anywhere? With you or without you, Mirrin?"

Mirrin opened the door on the back of the gig, and kicked down the folding steps.

"Only you can answer that question, Houston."

"Where are you going?"

"To the theatre. It's only a minute's walk."

"Mirrin . . . I . . ."

"Will you meet me after the performance, in the tearoom?"

"I . . . *yes, damn you!* Where else do I have to go?"

The rest was inevitable. But it did not happen abruptly or tempestuously as Mirrin, that afternoon, might have imagined. By four-thirty, when the couple met again in the crowded tearoom, the coalmaster had shaken off his depression, or, for Mirrin's benefit, cleverly pretended that everything was sweet. He did not apologise for his outburst, and Mirrin, used now to following his lead, let the matter lie dormant once more. She felt sadness over Donald Wyld's death, but only distantly, as everything that happened in Blacklaw now seemed as hazy as the August horizon.

On the infrequent occasions when Houston Lamont and Wilf Talboys met, they exchanged no more than polite greetings. Not so Blanche. The coalmaster appeared to hold a fascination for her and she engaged him in conversation whenever possible. Houston was polite but restrained with the young woman, as he was with everyone. It was Blanche's news, however, imparted in secret to Mirrin, that began the gradual dissolution of that particular phase of Mirrin Stalker's life.

"I had a letter: a letter from Henry," Blanche said.

"What does he say?"

"He still loves me. He still wants to marry me. He's not in Birmingham at all now. He's gone permanent to Marlingford. There's a lot of work there for carpenters and the like, what with the new building. It's the coming place, Marlingford. It's warmer on the east coast, too, don't you think?"

Mirrin said, "Have you told your parents?"

"Told them what?"

"That you've heard from Henry."

"I will, in my own good time."

"Is he coming to see you?"

"As soon as he can get away."

Mirrin was happy for Blanche, and hoped that her beau would not be too overawed by Wilfrid, or too canny and cautious in his wooing.

In the meantime, the troupe played to capacity houses every evening. There were fresh sketches and songs to learn and rehearse, though memorising and timing were becoming instinctive processes for Mirrin. She had had very little opportunity to deepen her relationships with Ada and Pru during that summer run. Table talk was dominated by Wilf and his grandiose schemes for the winter. He had been badgering Ockram fiercely of late, puffing up the value of the troupe to Harrison Colcutt, appealing for a spot in a London music hall for the Christmas season.

"But what about Grossby?" Ada asked. "We've allers gone to Grossby at Christmas."

"We're too big for Grossby now," said Wilf. "Too . . . too sophisticated. Ain't that right, Mr. Ockram?"

"We'll see," Ockram replied, which was as forthcoming as the agent's agent ever allowed himself to become during his regular calls at the Grand.

To Mirrin, though, Ada confided, "I hope Mr. Colcutt puts Wilf right back in his place."

"Why, Ada? A London booking means everything to him," Mirrin said.

"It's not as though we're young and strugglin' to build a career for ourselves. We're past all that."

"But three or four seasons hard work, in London for the winter, in the likes of Beale, or Brighton, for summers, and you would have a fine nest-egg for retirement."

"If Wilf tastes success in London, we'll never retire," said Ada, dolefully. "And as for the nest-egg, we haven't been spendthrift: we've a bit tucked away."

"I'm surprised to hear you talk this way, Ada," said Mirrin.

"You may be right. I'm just weary, that's all. Warm weather allers makes me a bit liverish. No point in fretting about the future. London bookings don't grow on trees, not good ones at any rate. You can bet that if Harrison Colcutt does hire us out to a London manager it'll only be to a penny-whistle house. We're not London style, y'know, dear."

"I thought . . ."

"Thought you were?" said Ada. "You've been listenin' too much to our Wilf. No, London would swallow us hup, even you, luv."

Ada's pessimism, however, had a basis in wishful-thinking, and it was not shared by the enigmatic Ockram nor, it seemed, by the great recluse, Harrison Colcutt.

It was the last night of the month of August, sardine-tin houses at both shows, excursionists laying siege to the resort in defiance of snobbish attempts of Beale's residents to perform the impossible trick of soaking the transient artisans of their hard-earned cash while making them feel less than welcome in a fortress of aspiring middle-class patronage. It was never more apparent that Beale would soon have to make up its mind, like Blackpool, and jump one way or t'other.

Social considerations, however, mattered little to Mirrin and the Talboys' troupe. They altered their material according to the pattern of the audience and, that Saturday, there was nothing much by way of elegance and whimsy in the programme, rather a return to the level of sentimentality, jollity and 'salt', as Wilf called it, on a par with the Grossby prototype.

Though it was expected that Ockram would be in the house — standing at the back with a brandy and seltzer in his hand like as not — nobody could possibly have known that the rear aisle of the Grand was graced by the presence of no less a person than Mr. Harrison Colcutt himself, an 'excursionist' down for a discreet survey of his valuable properties all the way from Leeds.

It was probably as well that Wilf had no inkling that the Great God Colcutt would be present. As it was, the acts were unforced and energetic in response to the enthusiasm of an audience that best suited the efforts of the performers. There was no false straining after sophistication, no attempt at all to 'do' the smart thing. Rapport between Mirrin and the lads and lassies was at its most acute. The young woman rose to the occasion by giving of her very best, moulding their emotions with an innate skill, abetted by her sympathy with their needs. Only a dozen times or so since her entry into musical hall had she been quite so winning, raising her skills and learned talents to a pitch far above her professional experience.

Mirrin's one and only foray into Gaiety elegance and wit was with 'Wicked, Beguiling Young Witch', something of a hallmark on the north-west coast that summer, a song without which no evening performance would be complete. In the style of rendering, however, was an implied comment, a satire on the whole ethos of self-cultivated refinement which seemed to say that Mirrin Stalker was still one of *them*, and had nothing but derision for the mores of the trading class she portrayed. She was less flirtatious than insulting to the Swell — mimed by Wilf — who sought her favours, and in the end refused to go off on his candy-striped arm. Instead she waited for a cloth-capped millhand, a very muffled Blanche disguised by mutton-chop moustaches, who escorted her towards the wings as Mirrin confided over her shoulder —

"Looking back with clearer vision,
And a mind both sound and sane,
I have come to this conclusion —
I won't have none of THEM again."

An exit line which brought the house down along with the third act curtain.

It was after the performance, later than ever because of numerous encores: Mirrin was changing in the cubicle dressing room below the pier. She was in too much of a hurry to meet Houston to notice that Ada, Pru and Blanche were not in their alcoves and was almost through with her toilet before the door opened and Blanche, still in stage costume, breathlessly summoned her to Wilf's dressing room. Mirrin's protests were ignored as Blanche rushed back along the corridor and ascended the steps.

Puzzled, Mirrin followed.

Champagne on a small table was the first thing that Mirrin really noticed in the dressing room, tall blonde glasses of 'bubbly', a couple of magnums in buckets fetched from the saloon bar. The Talboys family formed a horse-shoe around the table and the scuffed plush armchair beside it. Ockram was there, looking less saturnine than usual, dispensing a brimming glass to the man in the armchair.

"Mirrin," Wilf said in his plumiest accent, "I would like to introduce you to Mr. Colcutt, our . . . our benefactor."

She understood then why Colcutt was shy of travelling. He was a small man in his early fifties, with the hunched shoulders and pigeon chest of the chronic asthmatic. He was also incredibly ugly, the skin of his face pitted with a granular disease which looked as if he had been blasted with a blunderbuss full of black pepper. Soft, silky black hair was combed into a series of three waves, perhaps to give him a few extra inches, though there was nothing at all in his plain manner of dress to suggest that he nurtured any vanity about his appearance. He was clean shaven, and had a cautious twinkle in his eye as he screwed his deformed body round in the chair to survey Mirrin.

"Mr. *Harrison* Colcutt, Mirrin," said Ada, prompting the girl to curtsey or give some similar gesture of deference.

"You were a miner, sir, weren't you?" Mirrin asked.

"Might've known you'd say that without beatin' around the bush," Colcutt told her. "Even those as guess tend to hop and shuffle around the subject."

"I'm . . . I'm sorry, sir," Mirrin said, recovering from her astonishment. "I just didn't . . . didn't expect . . ."

"North Restal colliery, up in Tyneside," Colcutt said, still watching Mirrin carefully. "Long before you were born, lass."

"Closed down, wasn't it?" Mirrin said.

"Blasted right off the face of the earth. Flooded, too. Cost sixty lives, an' maimed a heap more."

"I'm sure Mr. Colcutt didn't grace us with his presence just to discuss coalmining," Wilf said. "He . . . he has news for us. News which he wishes to impart now."

Ignoring Wilfrid Talboys, Colcutt continued his conversation with Mirrin. He spoke easily, pausing only now and again to suck in air, chest heaving under the black waistcoat, his lungs making that faint hissing which Mirrin recognised as black lung, in one of its various forms.

"I'll say this for you, Miss Stalker," Colcutt said, "you don't look much like a coal-shifter now."

"I'll take that as a compliment, Mr. Colcutt."

"When I watched you there tonight, though, there was something about you that reminded me of girls I used to know. When did you turn your back on the coalpits?"

"Couple of years ago."

"Take it, you wouldn't go back?"

"Not if I can help it."

"I doubt if you'll have to lift a riddle again, lass."

Mirrin waited, the champagne glass which Ockram had given her untouched in her hand. She glanced around the circle, noting Wilf's frantic eagerness, Ada's anxiety, Pru's disguised fear. Strange how Colcutt brought these raw emotions to the surface.

The man got to his feet. Ockram did not offer to assist him though the process cost much effort. Independence, toughness of character marked Harrison Colcutt still. He leaned into an ash stick — no malacca silver-knobbed cane for this man — and smiled for the first time.

"Had to come. See for myself. Can't argue with ticket sales, right enough. But I was curious," he said, "to learn your appeal."

It was abundantly clear that Colcutt addressed Mirrin, and Mirrin alone. Nobody dared interrupt.

Mirrin said, "Perhaps you can explain it t'me, then, sir."

Colcutt laughed, wheezily. "Never could. Some make it in this game. Some don't. Better than you have collected a bushel of stinkers every other performance, and wound up warblin' in the gutter."

"There's a lot better than me."

"Aye, but you're bold," said Colcutt.

"I've Wilf, Ada and Pru to thank . . ."

"I know that," Colcutt interrupted. "Tell me, you're not leavin' the troupe, are you?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Friend Ockram tells me you've turned up a beau; a feller not short of a bit o'brass."

"I don't see what that's got to . . ."

"Look ahead, that's my motto."

Mirrin said, "If it's future bookings, you'll have to discuss that with Wilf."

Wilf said, "I'm open to any offer, Mr. Col . . ."

"You're a fast riser, Miss Stalker. But are you a sticker?" Colcutt asked.

"I'll stick — as long as I'm wanted."

"Beale's a soft spot," Colcutt said. "How about Liverpool?"

Blustering, disappointed, Wilf said, "Liverpool, but . . . ?"

"Liverpool for ten weeks, then on down to London for Christmas," Colcutt continued.

"London?" said Mirrin.

"London!" Wilf said. "A Christmas show in London!"

Staggered at the enormity of the news, the trouper, was revived only by a swig from his champagne glass.

"All of us?" Mirrin said.

"Yes, the full troupe," said Colcutt. "For eight weeks, through Christmas. I've put you out to Leburn, manager of the Pantheon, in the Marylebone Road. Not the West End but it'll do to blood you. Pantheon's been doing all right."

"A . . . family hackt?"

"Mainstays," said Colcutt. "Others to support you, of course; solo acts. Variety for the metropolis."

"I agree," said Wilfrid, without further argument. "I agree."

"Leburn will provide the material. I take a cut, of course."

"Naturally, naturally," said Wilfrid.

"And," Colcutt went on, "I want a condition from you that you'll play my theatres next summer. No shiving off to Didcot, or some other whale down there."

"Signed, sealed and delivered, sir," Wilfrid assured him.

"Mr. Colcutt is branching out, you see," Ockram put in. "We'll have a little share in Ramsgate or Brighton come next summer, if we're lucky."

"Might I discreetly enquire as to the fee?" said Wilf.

"Forty pounds the act the week," said Ockram.

"Forty: God!" said Wilfrid.

Mirrin said, "Before or after your slice, Mr. Colcutt?"

The agent grinned. "Might have known you'd ask, Miss Stalker. After."

Ockram said, "You're all very lucky that Mr. Colcutt's created this opportunity for you."

"Very lucky: very, very lucky!" Wilfrid agreed. "We won't disappoint."

"Ten weeks in Liverpool first, though," Ockram put in.

"Liverpool," Wilfrid crooned ecstatically. "My favourite city."

"Ten weeks at the old price, Wilfrid," Ockram said. "You're not all covered in fame and flowers just yet, y'know."

"But we will be," Wilf Talboys said. "Never fear, Mr. Colcutt. We will be. All we need is the chance."

"And Mirrin Stalker," Colcutt said.

Outside the Park the afternoon was already waning towards September's early dusk. Their love-making over, the couple in the bed talked softly, intense in the intimacy of the curtained room.

"No, Houston, it's not for ever. London's just another step along the way for me."

"And what of me?"

"I thought you said you would follow me to Hades just to be with me?" Mirrin turned in the bed and put her arm about him. "I'm sorry, Houston. This is too serious a subject for glib remarks."

"I wish I could understand you, my love."

"It isn't me that's hard to understand," Mirrin said. "It's probably the same with all lovers who choose to reach across the gap. God, how limited we are in our choices!"

"You mean, because I am a coalmaster and you a collier's daughter."

"I'm not that now," Mirrin said. "I'm on my way t'becomin' a famous music-hall artiste."

For a moment the man thought that she was wholly serious. He cocked his head on the pillow and squinted at her. The wry grin on her lips told him that she was mocking herself again — not the actors' profession, however: that she would never do.

"Is such a change possible?" Houston asked.

"Of course," said Mirrin. "I've proved it to be possible."

"Yes, for you, because you are young and have no responsibilities."

"Is the past such a dreadful burden, Houston?"

"It seems that I can't escape it. The past is also my present and my future."

Mirrin placed her forefinger against his lips. "Don't try to be a philosopher, Houston. Practicality suits you better."

"The theatre's a sham."

"I can't let you off with that."

"But it's the truth, Mirrin. What do the audience see? A gay, cheerful girl flaunting glamour and a carefree indifference to reality. Ah! It's no more than an image of what they want their own lives to be."

"Is that so bad, Houston?"

"You can't sustain this dream for ever, Mirrin. What will happen when you waken up?"

"I'll have to find another dream, Houston."

"Really, I have no patience with dreamers."

"But you have, luv. You dreamed of finding me again, didn't you? Even now you dream of taking me out of reality, keeping me for yourself."

"Would that not please you?"

"Houston, there's no place where we would both be free of Blacklaw."

"Nonsense."

"Even here, you're troubled by it."

Gently Lamont pushed her away from him. He reached for the wine glass on the bedside table and, hoisting himself on to the pillow, drank down the sweet red liquid.

"Blacklaw!" he said. "Always you reduce it to Blacklaw. You cannot blame Blacklaw for the change in your feelings towards me."

"It's true, Houston, that my feelings have changed."

A flicker of dismay showed in his eyes, as if she had slighted him. "So, it's finished?"

"You should have taken more from this summer," Mirrin said.

"All I wanted was you."

"Aye, here in this bedroom."

"*No.*"

"Please, don't shout."

"What if you . . . if you . . . are with child?"

Startled, Mirrin hesitated before answering. "Then I will do what all sensible waifs an' fallen women do, Houston: I'll come trailing home again."

"To me?"

"I . . . can't answer. Besides, I'm not with child."

"Can you be sure? We've joined so often here this summer."

Mirrin bit her lip. "That's a woman's trick, Houston. Do you wish me to give birth to a bastard, like that poor lass my brother destroyed?"

"It would be quite different for you."

"God! You want an *excuse*," the girl exclaimed, in disbelief. "You want something positive and dramatic to give you a jolt, a keg of black powder to blast away the rocks and make a new opening."

"All I want, Mirrin, is you."

"No." She shook her head. "There's nothing lasting for us, Houston. I've known from the beginning — aye, from that first night in Blacklaw, in your house — that today would come. So, I think, have you?"

"You are always so damned sure of everything, Mirrin Stalker."

"I am sure of one thing, Houston. I'm sure that you'll take up the reins of your own life again. You'll be the coalmaster again, not just some passive hand that signs the papers your wife puts before you."

"Is that all you wish for me, Mirrin: power, not love?"

"You've had love, Houston. But I'm not sure that you recognised it."

"I love *you*."

"But I'm no longer the Mirrin Stalker you knew, Houston. I've grown up. I've changed."

"I'll tell you this, Mirrin. You may think that you are free of Blacklaw. But it is my turn to make an assertion: you will be back, back home in Blacklaw soon."

"I doubt it."

"The black earth's in you, too. You can't hide behind silks and rouge for ever. Not you, Mirrin; not Alex Stalker's daughter." He dropped the glass to the carpet. It fell without breaking and rolled away out of sight under the trailing coverlet. "I believe that you will come home again. And I'll be there, waiting. Whatever you think of me, however much you suppose my nature has changed — I will wait for you, and hope."

Now that she had brought him to a final decision, she regretted it, washed by a wave of panic and nostalgia. "I . . . I won't be leaving Beale for another fortnight, Houston. Stay with me that long?"

"I will go home when it suits me, Mirrin. I may not be the master here, but I am my own man to that degree."

"I didn't mean to hurt you, Houston. Please stay a little longer."

"It was necessary to come here. I don't regret it," he said, flatly. "It was a . . . a cure, perhaps. I went a little mad when Dorothy died."

"It's allowed, Houston, when we love somebody."

"The way I love you?"

"Different: different, Houston."

"I won't give up hope, Mirrin. One day you'll learn to love me as I love you. When the day comes that you weary of this play-acting business, when you are hurt and sick at heart, you'll find me in Blacklaw. I promise that I'll be more welcoming than you have been."

Guilt at her inability to love him as deeply as he loved her overwhelmed Mirrin. She was ashamed of her waywardness, her selfish quest for freedom. There was much in what he said. But she had come too far now to struggle with a fresh beginning.

"It is almost time, Mirrin."

"Time?"

"For your performance," he said. "Dress, and be on your way."

"Houston, will you come to the theatre tonight?"

"Yes, of course," the coalmaster answered.

Mirrin sensed that he was merely being kind. It was no surprise to see the private box vacant at both houses or to receive a sealed letter after the curtain rang down on the supper show.

Still dressed in her gaudy frock, Mirrin took the letter out on to the quiet deck propped above the sea. There, by the light of a hanging lamp, she read, "*Dearest, I will wait for you always, and love you always. When your butterfly days are over, I know that you will come home.*"

Butterfly days: how accurate that phrase seemed. How oddly poetic of Houston to coin it. Yes, Mirrin thought wistfully, that was the ideal, flitting from flower to flower, colourful and weightless. But, in parting, Houston had made her aware of the brevity of all pleasures, the need to find roots in reality before she fluttered into nothingness. It was ironic that, in losing her, Houston had somehow changed her yet again.

In two weeks and a day she would move on with the Talboys to Liverpool and, though she did not know it then, the butterfly summer would be over and gone, and another cycle of her life destined to begin.

PART THREE

Call Home the Heart

One

FOR THE MOST part, the Scottish summer had been dull and wet. Towards the middle of September, however, the weather treated the colliers of Blacklaw to a spell of fair, warm days that dried roofs and evaporated puddles and cajoled displays of blankets and tattered rugs onto the backgreen drying ropes, making wigwams for the bairns' short evenings' play between school and bedtime. But the Indian summer was too late in coming, winter too close for comfort. Besides, in many subtle ways the mood of the community had changed. Even Lamont's recent return to harness did not auger well for the miners' wellbeing in the cold months ahead.

There were some who admired Sydney Thrush's ruthlessness; a burly faction that believed in survival of the fittest and banked their hopes of prosperity on strength of muscle. The aging, the sick and the idle, along with most of the dissidents, had been weeded out, leaving a hard, honed and highly competitive workforce that jerked up the weekly tonnage spurred on by a master whose authority was total and, therefore, unquestionable.

Lamont's reappearance, his careful, watchful, tactful tinkering with Thrush's schemes, divided the colliers, though none could decide behind which throne the wife's power lay. Bold bachelor bucks, imported from other tough fields, were all for Thrush and openly despised the cosy family unity of the village. They lived, fifty or more, in rough shacks on the wasteground by the Clayburn coups along with the sprawling, brawling Williams clan, with whom they fought endlessly, viciously, and spent their hard-earned pay on booze and whores. They were Thrush's brigands to a man. They loved machines and dangerous seams and worked them, tamed them, for the extra shillings that the dirty jobs entailed.

Fear was an emotion that colliers learned to mould to their own purposes. It was part and parcel of the initiation of green apprentices; the constant companion of 'wee hoose' workers wedged into the rotting, water-dribbling niches of newly breached sections; the first speckles of blood in a man's spittal, the racking cough that did not ease with Friar's Balsam and the coming of spring. But few of the Blacklaw miners had ever regarded fear as a proper testing ground to separate loyal hands from trouble-makers, or as a regular contest to divide men from boys, irrespective of age. Experience was valueless, caution a coin of no worth, under Thrush.

Daring to the point of suicidal insanity resulted from Thrush's policies. In the course of that summer four men died and fourteen suffered serious injury in the speed and heat of expansion. When Inspectors came sniffing and asking questions, however, silence was the colliers' answer, defence of the regime under which they lived.

Thrush paid well for foolhardiness. His bachelor gang reaped the best profits and thus indoctrinated the town's impressionable sons in their heedless philosophy. It was a cruel, clever method of wresting from the workers maximum effort for a minimum of silver. It galled those who understood it, men like Rob Ewing, bondserf to circumstances that chained him more tightly than ever to the tied house and Lamont's pit, breadwinner for his father and mother as well as his ailing wife.

Callum Ewing did not find it easy to sleep now. The stagnation in his lungs was worse at night and he had taken to sitting up very late, sometimes until dawn, by the kitchen grate in the chair that had been carted up from his own house and crammed into Rob's kitchen. He sat quite still, hardly moving at all during the long quiet hours of darkness, pipe in mouth, eyes on the shifting patterns of the dross banked behind the iron bars. There was more wistfulness than brooding in his eyes, though, and no bitterness. He confessed that an idle life suited him just fine at his time of life, not far short of fifty-one, with all his youth and his prime left down there in the pit like abandoned props or the bones of the ponies who died below.

As Callum waned, Rob seemed to wax. He even put on weight, n spite of the meagreness of the diet. He had become sullen and ullying, one of the players of Sydney Thrush's game, competing vith the ruthless men from Slaven and Redburn, Carsehorn and ne Geddie Glen, hell holes and death pits where the only differnce between those at the face and those in the shanties up top vas that the underground shift were a shade nearer to Auld Nick nan their pitiful families above.

Rob seemed to need as little sleep as his father. In summer, nough, he did not cling by the fire but took himself off to the elds, even in the pitch damp dark, to walk and breathe the air, nd, Callum suspected, to stoke his bitterness with dreams of all nat might have been if only Mirrin Stalker had taken him in narriage instead of leaving him on the bough for poor Eileen AcMasters.

But that September night, though it was pleasant out, Rob tayed home. There was no reason for it, just mood, as it was mood ot sympathy that inched him into stilted conversation with his ld man.

"Stayin' in?" Callum asked.

"Aye, for a while."

"The rabbits'll miss you."

"I can do without your remarks, Da."

"Sorry, son."

"Can y'not sleep at all?"

"Och, aye, but it seems such a waste o'time, sleepin' when I'm ot tired. Sleepin's for workin' men."

"You're well out of it."

"I couldn't keep up that kind o'pace, you mean?"

"Anybody over thirty's hard pushed."

"But not you?"

"I can manage."

"Have you been in the new section, the branch?"

"Aye."

"I thought the wage packet was gey fat."

"Six bob fatter. Anyhow, my wage is none o'your business. It's etween me an' Eileen an' nobody else."

"Is it as bad as they say down there?"

"It's . . . bearable. You won't tell them, will you? Mam and ileen, I mean, about me workin' the thin seam?"

Callum shook his head. "I doubt that many o'the old schoo would've tackled that job, squeezin' heavy machinery int' a seam hardly thick enough for a man's shoulders."

"It works, though: the cutters chew up that sharp coal lik toffee."

"I wonder what Alex Stalker would've done?"

"That's a wasted thought, Da."

"He'd have fought them, I'm sure — even Thrush," Callun mused.

"Then he'd have gone the way of the rest — out on his blood lug."

"The Stalkers seem t'be managin' fine without him."

"On Lamont's charity; the blood-money he pays for havin bedded Mirrin."

"Now, lad, now!" Callum admonished. "There was never proo o'that."

"What's more, I'll wager he's been with her since. I'm eve inclined t'think that the bastard bairn the Stalkers are fosterin' *i* Mirrin's an' that Lamont *is* the father."

"Havers!"

"They always do all right, those Stalkers, no matter who the trample on. Look't Kate now. I thought she was the only dependable one in the bunch. But, no. She's as self-seekin' as the rest She's got her claws in yon poor baker. She'll be after his money."

"What money? Kellock's no' exactly makin' his fortune."

"But he's better off than any collier."

"That's maybe true: but the way I heard it, it was him tha fancied Kate. In fact, he'd marry her tomorrow, but she's holdin him off a while," Callum said.

"T'make him all the keener," said Rob.

"Change the subject, son," Callum growled. "I'm not so senil yet that I'll slander m'friends just for entertainment."

"Where *was* Lamont, then?" Rob said. "That's the big topi o'the day. Dunlop let slip that the master was abroad, inspectin marvels o'modern engineering. God, the whole process from sean t'grate will soon be done by machines, an' there'll be no place fo colliers at all."

"There'll be colliers for ever," Callum said.

"But maybe no' here."

"The pit's tighter, but it's still operatin': that's one fact not even the most rabid man can argue with."

"Thrush did that — an' we know how."

"What'll happen now that Lamont's back, though?" Callum said.

"Strife?"

"Strife between manager and owner is never good for the miner," Callum said.

"Nothin's ever good for the poor bloody . . ."

They were interrupted by a sound from the back bedroom. Both men fell at once into nervous silence, listening intently.

"Was that Eileen?" Callum asked.

"I'll see."

"It'll be those pills the doctor gave her yesterday, makin' her dream again."

"Wheesh," Rob said.

Moving stealthily across the kitchen he opened the bedroom door an inch. Seeing the glow of the candle within, he opened the door a little more. Eileen was awake. Propped on the pillow she looked soft and pretty, like a fine lady. Her brown hair was bound in two plaits and she wore a nightgown that showed off her young breasts. Rob entered the room and closed the door behind him.

"Did we wake you, darlin'?" he asked, with great tenderness.

"I heard voices."

"It was only me an' the old man havin' a blether."

"What about?"

"I don't know that I should tell you."

"Och, Rob, why not?"

"All right, then." Rob made a show of capitulation. "We were just sayin' that I should've waited an' found a more beautiful lass than you for a wife . . ."

"There's plenty t'choose from."

". . . but we counted out all the girls in Blacklaw, Eastlagg, Northrigg and even Hamilton, right back as far as Da could recall an' he an' me came t'the conclusion that you were the most beautiful."

"Rob Ewing, you're pullin' my leg."

"Snuggle down, Eileen. You must have your sleep. I'll keep the old devil quiet."

"Rob?"

"Aye?"

"Stay with me a while."

"I . . . Yes, I'll stay. Of course, I'll stay."

"Lie here beside me."

"Eileen . . ."

"Please, Rob."

"I've still got my boots on."

"Take them off."

"I'll . . . look, I'll sit here on the side o'the bed. How's that? I'll hold your hand, like this. I'll even sing t'you if you're not good."

The girl chuckled.

It was so unjust. There were no visible signs of the illness that made her useless as a wife. No signs at all that the excitement of love-making would, perhaps, be fatal. If there had been *some* wasting or swelling or obvious distress. But she was more ripe and beautiful than ever, now that she had grown to full womanhood protected from the hardships of life in the town. Even her hands were soft and pale and plump. There were no other hands like that in all Blacklaw. The flush upon her cheeks was a mockery of health, yet it seemed to add a last touch of sensuality.

If ever there was punishment, it was this: punishment for the lust that had caused him to force himself on Mirrin Stalker and, when she rejected him, for the months of longing for Eileen. The longing had been love and was love still, love without demonstration. Never once had Rob given his wife an inkling that he was consumed with bitterness. Never once, in her presence, had he been less than gentle. It was harder on her than on him. At least he had his health — and a future. He could escape out into the fields or the pit — aye, even the damned pit — where hard physical activity relieved his tensions. He pitied Eileen and cared for her. But he desired her too, achingly and constantly. Self-inflicted and rigorously maintained denials turned his love into a shameful kind of hatred. His servitude to decency and sham might last for years.

Rob stifled a sigh. He held Eileen's hand in his.

"Sleep," he said.

"I'll sleep soon."

She meant nothing by it, yet the phrase was plangent with meaning. Try as he might, Rob could not help but speculate on what he would do with his life, when he was free once more, free of the need to protect her from the fact that he was too weak to love her without desire and the contact with which marriage should be blessed.

"Aye, love," he said, smiling bleakly.

Very soon she did sleep, drifting down into sleep as swiftly and innocently as a child. Rob held still until he was sure that her sleep was deep and natural. Only then did he disengage his hand and ease himself out of the bedroom, leaving the candle alight.

Callum turned in the canvas chair.

"Is she all right, son?"

Rob hauled his jacket from its hook behind the kitchen door and clacked down the latch with his thumb. "She's fine." He stumbled out into the dark main street.

Veering east he headed for the moor and a howff he had built for himself in the lee of a gorse bush where, on fair nights, he could snatch a few hours' sleep alone in the fresh clean country air, dream of Mirrin Stalker and wonder how the imperfect balance of his life would be affected if ever she dared return.

The courtship of William Kellock and Kate Stalker was worked out with due deliberation. Kate had given Willie permission to woo her but had warned him that she would not be rushed into making a decision. Marriage was a subject that required commitment and she was not yet willing to commit herself to the necessary degree. Meekly, the baker agreed to the woman's terms, and gave his promise that he would not mention marriage, or even a period of engagement, until Kate gave him the nod.

Wisely, Flora kept off the subject with her daughter. During the weeks that followed Willie's proposal and Kate's guarded acceptance, Flora covertly watched her daughter for signs of weakening. She found none. Even at the age of thirty, Kate, it seemed, still cherished a dream of marriage based on love and not just respect.

It was this turn of events in her sister's life, however, that almost led to Betsy Stalker's downfall. Coincidence had no part in it. Indeed, it was inevitable that, in the closed societies in which they moved, Betsy Stalker and Randolph could not hope to keep their affair secret for ever.

Willie and Kate had gone for an evening visit to Glasgow, catching the train from Hamilton to College Station. It was a dry, brisk night, though cold. The couple were well wrapped up against the wind which, when they alighted in the city, moaned through the girders overhead. Their destination was not far from High Street, a lecture hall in Sorn Street. Here, as Willie had discovered from an advertisement in the *Glasgow Herald*, Mr. Chester Sloane was giving an illustrated talk on his travels in Africa, a show that had taken London by storm. Kate had no objection to learning more of foreign lands and was fired by Willie's enthusiasm for Sloane's achievements as an explorer. It was rather a rush to return from the pit and wash and change. But Willie was thoughtful enough to have a hired fly waiting at the bakery and they had just caught the seven o'clock train from Hamilton.

It was in College Station that the unexpected incident occurred which spoiled Kate's pleasure in Chester Sloane's descriptions of the wild tribes of Africa and took her mind away from the vivid, and hair-raising lantern slides.

The girl was before them, hurrying down the length of the platform towards the ticket gate. The skittish walk, the dress, the bobbing ringlets under the bonnet: unmistakably Betsy. For an instant Kate almost pulled Willie off his feet in her anxiety to catch up with her sister. Sudden embarrassment checked her, however, and she drew Willie on as fast as she could without explaining her reason. As Willie fumbled for the tickets in his waistcoat pocket, Kate stood on tiptoe and looked out towards the archway where her sister had gone.

Betsy emerged from the dispersing crowd and, to Kate's utter astonishment, was picked up by a waiting cab. The cabbie was there: Betsy did not summon him. The man had the door of the cab already open for her. He nodded familiarly as she approached and even assisted her inside. The cab drove off, making a sweep under the gas lamps across the cobbled yard then, as Kate and Willie came down towards the entrance, disappeared through the gates and out into the city.

"What's wrong, Kate, lass?" Willie asked, solicitously.

"Nothin'."

"You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"It's nothin', Willie: only the cold. I'll be fine when we're in the hall."

"Here, then, hold on t'me and we'll hurry as fast as we can. You'll be hungry. We'll have a bite first."

But there could be no comfort for Kate in the tearoom, no escape from the realisation that Betsy had lied. Fear that the girl, like her twin, was in trouble haunted Kate all that evening and throughout the night. She looked in vain for a sign of her sister on the return journey to Hamilton but had to hold off for another day before the deception was confirmed.

Mam was putting Neill to bed, and Betsy retired, directly after supper, to her room. It was there that Kate found her, seated before the mirror, combing her hair. She seemed surprised, but not startled, to receive a visit from Kate, who, in the past months, hardly ever entered the back room.

"You're . . . you're lookin' well, Betsy."

"Yes, I feel quite well, thank you, Kate."

The girl was mocking her, of course: that kind of polite communion was a thing of the past with the sisters. It had never really been their style in any case. Kate composed herself for the investigation.

"Where were you last night, Betsy?"

Was there an imperceptible tension in Betsy at the directness of the question? She continued combing her hair, squaring up to her image in the mirror, not meeting Kate's eye.

"In Hamilton, of course, at Margaret-Anne's house."

"Did you go out?"

"Yes, to the Evangelical Choir; just t'listen, though."

"Where?"

"The Cambridge Halls. Why? What makes y'ask, Kate?"

"Willie an' I were thinkin' of goin' t'the concert."

"Yes, that'll be very good," said Betsy, relieved.

"Maybe we'll see you there."

"Probably," said Betsy. "Probably."

Kate left the back room again, closing the door behind her.

With all the coolness of long practice, Betsy had told her a deliberate lie. As far as Kate knew there was no Evangelical concert in the offing in Hamilton. More to the point, Betsy had been in Glasgow, not with Margaret-Anne. Kate's hands trembled as she transferred the supper dishes to the sink and filled the kettle and set it on the hob.

How many nights had Betsy spent away from home in the past months? Dozens. Had she been in Glasgow on all of those occasions? Kate did not know Margaret-Anne Watson well, but it would surely not be difficult to break the accomplice down, to discover the purpose of Betsy's secret visits to the city. Kate shook her head. What was the point? Surely, the purpose must be all too obvious. Betsy was steering a course towards disaster.

Angrily Kate wondered if she would be called upon to bring another bastard baby into the house, to pull Betsy too out of a quagmire of scandal. There was nobody she could discuss the matter with. She certainly could not give any hint to Mam. She must keep it to herself and simply let events take their course.

If only Mirrin was here. Mirrin would know what to do. But Mirrin had left Blacklaw just to avoid such issues, to escape involvement in the problems of her greedy, impetuous and irresponsible family. It was all very well for Mirrin with her face and her figure and her boldness. But she, Kate, she was too plain ever to hope to escape. All she could hope for, it seemed, was a kind wee elderly baker for a husband, and more than her share of trouble.

Two

LIVERPOOL WAS A city of indiscriminate opportunity. Its cosmopolitan population, homegrown industries and flowing commercial wealth created many areas of divergence within its crowded wards. It could not readily agree on an image, being content to remain all things to all men with money on their minds. It epitomised the adventure of investment in its rawest state, a chequerboard of magnificent docks and huge brick warehouses, parks and coal dumps, shipwrights' yards, reeking foundries and chemical repositories, small bilious factories and large brown works, all importing and exporting, processing, refining, storing, packing, boiling, smelting, bottling, brewing and generally dabbling in every conceivable commodity.

The city seemed in a perpetual lather, busy, robust, positive, at odds with Mirrin's mood that smokey, fog-washed autumn. As she sat by the window of her room in the Commercial Hotel in Linnet Street and listened to the bustle of the old sea-orientated town, she felt detached from her future and indifferent to the fortunes which might await her in the south. It was the northern time, the time of migrations, inward and outward. Only born wanderers were free of the harking to be home again before the winter snows.

Mirrin saw herself as just another piece of cargo, shipped in from a foreign port, processed and put in bond in the confines of the Marine Hippodrome, a quaint, beetle-browed music hall tucked between chandlers' and publicans' premises in Ropemakers' Row, near the delta of the Canning, Salthouse and Albert docks. There she sang for sailors and artisans, stitchers, caulkers and pitchers, bricklayers' hogs and shopkeepers' lads, the wharf rats and their sallow women, the wives, daughters and chirpy sons of small traders and craftsmen. She sang to them of things they understood, mocked, loved or feared, including the odd shanty that Wilf had taught her to tickle the bargees, lightermen and deepsea mariners.

But, unexpectedly, Mirrin found that her attitudes were changing. She no longer liked the unruly crowds that packed the gallery or brawled in the stalls. She sang, danced and pattered now without conviction, reacting to applause with the same degree of indifference as she parried randy cat-calls and drunken insults. What was most disturbing to Mirrin perhaps was her ability to deceive. Until this booking she had seldom had to feign vivacity. Verve now had gone out of her, however, though she gave them every ounce of her skill in exchange for their brass. Skill, it seemed, was enough.

Ada and Pru noted the change and told her it was a natural part of the process of maturing. They assured her that she would be the better for it as a trouper. Blanche taught her more of the subtle meanings of cynicism, and only Wilfrid, lambent with rekindled ambition, remained pure in his ideals and ignored his protégée's disillusionment.

Houston's departure had left Mirrin a sediment of guilt over the ending of the affair. During the season in Beale, she had become selfish and self-protective, hardened in her resolve to remain free. But her freedom had found no direction. She was still in retreat from the black days in Blacklaw. London, she realised, was not her true goal. She had acquired that objective from Wilf, fired by vanity and Colcutt's flattering faith. London, the Pantheon, the Christmas engagement were mirages. The resonant solidity of Liverpool, that waystation for all the world, seemed to tell her so. Optimism was such an exploitable commodity, and the city's tabernacles of hope of profit screened the misery of failure, poverty and death, the impermanence of triumphs over the odds.

It was Sunday, a neutral afternoon, overcast, enclosed and damp. Out beyond Wallasey the foghorns lowed and the bumboats, plying the floats even on the Sabbath, hallooed mysteriously, a medley of melancholy sounds that sifted from the water fog like pagan answers to the sonorous bells of chapels and missions that called their followers to worship at all odd hours of the dusky day.

Mirrin had gone walking alone. She had invited Blanche to join her, but a correspondence with Henry Essam had sparked into activity again and Blanche's spare time was occupied penning endearments to her ardent young beau who was so intent on setting up his shop in Marlingford that his letters invariably yielded a few grains of sawdust or a shaving or two in lieu of a lock of hair. Ada and Pru were resting. Neither of the women had really benefited from the sea air of Beale. The strenuous summer engagement had taken its toll. Pru in particular had been suffering a dry hacking cough for weeks now. Though the local doctor would not commit himself to an exact diagnosis, Mirrin detected in his non-committal answers more than a hint of anxiety about the aging trouper's health.

Where Wilfrid was, that day of rest, was no mystery. He had gone with Ockram to Manchester to meet with a manager and 'have a swatch' at a couple of acts that Colcutt planned on putting into the Pantheon Christmas Box along with the Family. Having been assured of his worth, and with Mirrin Stalker as his trump card, little Wilfrid Talboys had replaced his obsequious eagerness with a mantle of knowing self-assurance in all matters pertaining to 'Variety'. Her Wilf was coming on as strong as a peppermint lozenge, Ada said, and had better watch that Mr. Colcutt didn't just decide to spit him out.

In Liverpool, though she was recognised now and again, Mirrin was no star. The public attitude to the entertainers was practical in that hard-working city. Outside the Hippo they were accorded a nod or a grin or a touch of the cap but no undue familiarity or awe. Mirrin got her fair share of speculative looks from men, old and young, but not much more than any girl would have done and, indeed, there was a reserve in the manner of the artisans that held more disdain, perhaps, than respect.

She was free to explore the city as she wished, to wander the slum quarter round Fontenoy and Sawney Pope or, for variation, up into the posh neighbourhood of All Saints Church where the stucco mansions of the nouveau riche stood back from the Princes Boulevard. Most often, though, Mirrin found herself strolling the waterfront, eyes, ears and nose stimulated by the diversity of impressions that swarmed from the wharves and quays. She meandered from Canada dock to the Pottery Beach and back again, fascinated by the ships. The names emblazoned on the hulls formed a catalogue to whet the appetite of any landlocked wanderer — the *Ranji Princess*, Calcutta; *Northern Star*, Antwerp; *Windwards*, Valparaiso; the *Demeter*, the *Tern*, the *Loch Garry*, the *Seattle Seamaid*, and many more, a changing litany to roll on the tongue and savour in the imagination.

When the sun shone on the Mersey and Mirrin stood in its rusty autumn glow looking from the Landing Piers to the masts and cluttered riggings that webbed the shores of Birkenhead and the Wallasey Pool, it was fine to let her mind rove thoughtfully over distant places. But on that fog-bound, shrouded afternoon the ships' canvasses seemed weighted by sadness, sails folded like the wings of drowned gulls, or hanging slack in the ropes like laundry that would never dry. Then she was Mirrin again, the Stalker lass from Main Street, homesick and lonely, thinking of the shortening days and her Mam filling the big iron stock pot to set by the hob where it would bubble and simmer all winter; thinking of Kate's nose beginning to go red, and her sister's salve for chilblains, the sharp, pleasant smell of it, and Betsy's mock fur muff unearthed from the wardrobe and scrubbed and fluffed up to be ready for the first cold snap. And the smoke rising soft from the wee lums and spreading low across the Sheenan glen in the early twilight.

She was a far cry from Blacklaw now, with time to loiter and watch the world wag, warm and smart in her winter day dress with its corselet of astrakhan cloth and the skirt with the apron-front, and a bag on her arm and seven button real suede gloves and an extravagant velvet Charlotte Corday hat, a shade informal but quite suitable for her station. But the clothes were really a small reward, a labour to pack, and a chore to clean and press and trim correctly. Besides, it mattered hardly at all what she wore, for only the Sabbath shift saw her and the odd seaman, and she knew she looked too rich for their blood.

There was no blink of sun to the west. Twilight was defined only by the lighting of coal-oil lamps and gas fans along the fronts. The big dim warehouses, whose windows had the faint candleshine shapes of cathedrals in mourning, faded into the salt-grey, darkening fog.

He came along the cobbles by the back of the Huskisson, past bollards and tall wedge-posts, the glow behind him from the dockshed lanterns like penny gold. He walked casually, with all the old jaunty swagger, one fist in the pocket of his black peajacket, the other held down, discreetly, so that the spray of late hand-cut roses in their paper cone seemed like a beachcomber's trophy that he had picked up and forgotten to discard. In the throat of his white shirt collar was a blue kerchief. His trousers were thick cream nankeen, not loose but tailor-shaped like those of a naval officer. On his head he wore a clinker-brimmed cap with a tack of braid on it, pushed back so that his curly hair puffed out above his ears. He was browner than ever, varnished by weather, and had trimmed down his waist and the flesh of his face so that he looked very hard and lean and raffish.

She knew it was Tom minutes before the shadow-graph became distinct against the misty light. She knew he had planned it — and was glad.

Stopping a yard away, he studied her, head cocked.

"Well, well now, if it isn't my flower o'the tattie field," he said. "This is a turn up for the book!"

"The back of a dock's not a strange place t'find a sailor," Mirrin said, her heart pounding like mad.

"Ah, so y'were on the scout for a sailor, were you?"

"I heard there was a rascal tink snippin' the blooms up by the Square: I thought it might be you."

"Lost again, then," Tom said. He drew the bouquet from his side and peered at it self-consciously. "I bought these for the lass who's been knockin' out the eyes at the Hippo for the last couple o'weeks."

"Blanche Talboys, d'you mean?"

"I mean Mirrin Stalker."

Mirrin did not accept the bouquet immediately. "Is this a token of apology, by any chance?"

"Apology? For what?"

"Skippin' off last year an' leavin' me to Mag Marshall's not-so-tender mercies."

"You were to blame for my departure."

"That's a lame excuse. You're as casual as the wind, Tom."

"I didn't look for you all over England just t'argue the toss about something that happened long ago."

"Only a year."

"Be that as it may," Tom said, "it's ancient history as far as I'm concerned. I've been round the globe since then — and made a bob or two. By the looks of it, you're not the girl you were then either. My abrupt leave-takin' doesn't seem to have done you any lastin' harm."

"How did you find me?" The question echoed her meeting with Houston in Beale. Being an entertainer was altogether too public a career. Not that she wanted to hide, not from Houston, and not from Tom Armstrong.

"I thought about you a lot out there on the high seas."

"When you were feelin' squeamish?" said Mirrin.

"When I was lonely," Tom said. "And that was too often for comfort, believe me. By God, Mirrin, but you lead me a merry dance."

"I lead you . . ."

"I've been in search of you for the last three weeks," he explained. "Did you suppose it was blind chance that brought me up this quay this particular afternoon?"

"I thought you docked in Liverpool."

"I did," Tom said. "But how was I to know you'd gone theatrical. I've been back t' Galloway, t' Mag Marshall. As you can imagine, my flower, she was precious little help. But one pal in the camp did tell me that he'd seen your name on a playbill in the Manchester area. Just as well or I'd've been off up north t'scour the colliery towns."

"How could you be sure it was my name on that playbill?"

Tom grinned. "It seemed right, somehow. Any roads, I tracked you down, right back t'Liverpool where I'd started from. And here I am."

"What d'you mean — seemed right?"

"I remembered your voice: not bad, an' certainly loud enough t'wake the boozers in the back aisles."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Armstrong. Just for that I'll accept your posy."

"May I take your arm an' walk with you a bit?"

"Why not? I've nothing better t'do with myself today," Mirrin said. "Besides, I think your determination merits a wee reward."

"I've never strolled about with a genuine Song Bird before."

"And I've never taken a promenade with a sailor."

"Former sailor: now retired."

"That impulse didn't last long, Tom."

"I didn't mind the work, but I hated the confinement."

"Where did you sail?"

"One long voyage: ten months: a cargo of shoddy to Quebec, up the St. Lawrence river in Canada; then coastal trading down the American seaboard to Charleston in Carolina, where we picked up cotton in the raw to bring home."

"It sounds exciting."

"Aye, flower, the places an' the nights are etched in my memory. But the seaman gets to see precious little other than wharves and docks. All the time, I wanted back to . . ."

Tom shrugged.

Mirrin tugged his elbow tighter. She could smell the scent of the roses coming sweetly up from the paper cone in her hand. "You: homesick?"

"It surprised me, too." He changed the subject, abruptly. "What of yourself, Mirrin?"

"I left the tinks just after you did the bunk — they kicked me out, to be truthful — an' I worked in Grossby in a mill for a while."

"God, that's no life for a girl like you."

"So I found out."

Mirrin outlined the circumstances that had carried her from Mag Marshall's encampment to the stage of the Marine Hippodrome, Liverpool, and told him of the London engagement. She spoke for almost an hour, talking more freely than she had done to anyone, even Houston, during the last year. Slowing his step, Tom encouraged her to pour out her disillusionment with the music hall, her divided loyalties to the Talboys, and her prevailing mood of restlessness.

Dusk deepened. Fog thickened and became chill as they wandered the cobbled streets that linked into the Liverpool waterfront. They passed warehouses, and the low unyielding frontages of dwellings, elfin windows gold and yellow in the darkness now, the aroma of Sunday dinners strong.

When Mirrin had recounted her 'adventures' to the man, she was suddenly embarrassed by her garrulousness. Tossing her head, she looked around. "Where have you led me, Tom Dandy?"

"Near enough home," he said.

"Home?"

"Your hotel: the Commercial."

"You've been spyin' on me."

"I saw your performance on Thursday night."

"Did you approve?"

"You're different on stage, Mirrin," he said, seriously. "More . . . more brittle: less . . . real, maybe."

The girl did not reply.

Tom said, "I thought of waitin' at the back door, but that didn't seem right for an old friend. So I followed you back to the hotel."

"An' today?"

"Aye: I hoped you might be out an' about today."

"You're still a cunning devil, I see. You didn't lose that on the ocean."

"I didn't lose anythin'," Tom said. "I made some siller."

"On a seaman's wage?"

"An' with a pack o'cards."

"That's more like the truth."

"I've fattened up the nest-egg, Mirrin."

"Have y'now?"

"It's a great pity you're set on London — if you are set on London."

"Oh, I'm for London all right."

Tom nodded. "I'm for home, for Scotland."

"When?"

"As soon as I can."

"Slippin' away in the dawn again?"

"Tomorrow, first thing."

"To do what? Mend pots? Fleece poor lads at the cards? Marry Colly Marshall, maybe?"

"You have changed: it's not just on stage."

Contritely, Mirrin said, "I'm sorry, Tom. I shouldn't have said that. About Colly Marshall."

"D'you really want to know what my plans are?"

"You've listened patiently to my tales of woe, the least I can do is return the favour."

"Come an' have a bite o'supper."

"At your place?"

"I haven't got a place, Mirrin," Tom said. "I've a shelf in a mission with forty other drifters. No, no, that's not my purpose in lookin' you up."

"I'd like fine to take supper with you, Tom."

They dined in the back parlour of a small, cosy waterfront inn on the corner of Pine Street and Albert Lane, a plump-fronted hostelry that was not, to Mirrin's surprise, either cheap or vulgar. There were captains and mates, some with their ladies, in the booths at the back, and well-dressed gentlemen obviously disobeying the commandment about honouring the Sabbath by doing merchants' business over roast beef and marsala.

Throughout the meal, Mirrin and Tom talked of the events of the year that had separated them from their shared background, those brief months of hardship and bonhomie with the gypsy tribe. Absence it seemed had deepened their friendship. The meeting there in Liverpool, so far from home, marked a strange bond which neither the man nor the girl was willing to dissipate.

When the pudding plates had been cleared and Mirrin had done justice to the sweetmeats from the tray and Tom had lit himself a thin cigarette rolled in liquorice paper and poured out the last of the wine, he said, "I promised t'tell you what I intend t'do with the siller I've earned."

"I'm not obliged t'believe you, though, Tom?"

Gravely, Tom said, "I think you'll take my word for it this time, Mirrin. I've grown so damned tired of buzzin' about like a bumbly bee. It's time t'settle down."

"Your own fireside; your own table t'put your feet under?"

"Aye, it's nearly winter," Tom said. "Winter's the time when one man's hardship becomes another's gain."

"Let me guess."

"Go on."

"Land: you intend to rent land."

"That's it, flower. I'm after a piece of farm. Some cattle, an' enough grazin' to keep them on. It won't be anythin' grand or expensive. I just haven't that much in the purse. But I do have enough now t'make my move. An' that's what I intend t'do."

"Better do it soon," Mirrin said. "Before you get wooed away by somethin' else."

"Not this time. Not now. It's a farm for me. Thirty or forty acres . . ."

"In the highlands?"

"No, not far north. I'm no crofter," Tom said. "I want soil that'll yield t'hard work an' good management."

"I've heard talk that this is a time of depression for farmers, Tom."

"It is that," Armstrong confirmed. "But the smallholder, if he's cautious an' willin' t'adapt, can still earn a good darg."

"How?" said Mirrin. "And how can you do it when so many are failing?"

"Milk."

"Milk?"

"I'm not as daft as I look, Mirrin: no, nor so wayward. I've read about high farmin', an' I've kept abreast of developments. I've listened t'experts in agricultural matters, an' worked a wheen o'farms in my time with the clan. Damn it all, I've got the soil right through me, like most tinkie brats."

"That doesn't answer my question, Tom?"

"You know that they have huge ice-boxes that they can put down in the holds of ships now an' bring food fresh from foreign parts? In five or ten years Britain'll be fed on all sorts of foods grown in Canada or Denmark or Holland — not just cereals, but beef an' mutton, butter too. But the dairy farmer who lives near a railhead that serves a town, a growing town, he'll find himself in clover — if he's clever. Milk's the answer, Mirrin: fresh milk supplied daily to the townies. It fetches good prices an' there's no processing costs involved. Besides, the capital turnover is rapid, an' virtually assured."

"Why has nobody thought of this before?"

"But they have," Tom assured her. "Many farmers are beginnin' to look to milk to save their failing farms. It's never been popular because it's demanding. Anyhow, it's only these last ten years or so that high farming's begun to fall from grace an' transport's reached a point where daily delivery becomes practical. So I would be lookin' for a smallholding to let. I'll put down a year's rent in advance an' have enough left from my capital to take in stock. If dairy's not enough, then I can branch into fruit growin' or poultry."

"In Scotland?"

"Lanarkshire's my target. It's close to the towns, an' grazing's good for the most part."

"And what about labour?"

"That's the rub, Mirrin," Jack said. "I need a wife who'll work shoulder to shoulder with me an' help the place grow prosperous. It's not a farmhand I need, or can afford, it's a wife."

"It'll be no bargain for the woman, God help her."

"No bargain at all."

"Will you advertise?"

"I will not."

"How will you find such a daft woman, then?"

"Ah!" Tom exclaimed. "I hoped you'd see past the work to the satisfaction that can be obtained from it."

"I've heard that tale about the satisfaction of sheer brutal dog-labour before — an' I don't believe it," Mirrin said. "There's no grace in it."

"No grace in love?"

"So you want love thrown in?"

"I want love first."

"How'll you phrase that in your advertisement? Or will you just wait an' see which of the applicants falls for your charm?"

"I'm a damned sight less charmin' than I used t'be," said Tom, candidly. "I have a purpose now, a purpose that's been buildin' up in me for months, years in fact. I've no time for the niceties. I've got t'get at it."

"I admire your determination, Tom. I wish you luck."

"I'm no longer shiftless, Mirrin: not that I ever was, really, though you seemed t'think so. Do you suppose me t'be just another drifting tinker, now?"

Mirrin shook her head. "No, you've changed too, Tom. It's strange how quickly folk alter. I acknowledge that there's been change in myself, an' not just in circumstances."

"You're a music-hall star."

"No, I'm not that, not at heart."

"What are you, flower?"

"I . . . I can't be sure."

"A farmer's wife?"

"I . . ."

"My wife?"

"No, Tom, I . . ."

"I'm not just lookin' for a kitchen servant an' a dairy maid an' a bedmate," Tom said. "I've admired you since the first day we met. I think I saw you then as my wife, though there have been a few occasions since when I could've clipped your lug so angry did you make me."

Mirrin looked down at the roses which the innkeeper had thoughtfully put in a glass of water. She was not dismayed or confused by Tom's offer of marriage. It was not, she knew, a convenience arrangement, a proposition drawn up and calculated. All along she had known that he cared for her. Perhaps she had been too immature a year ago, after her sad affair with Houston, to recognise the sincerity of his offer then. She recognised it now, though. It was abrupt, plain, positive. Ironically, Tom Armstrong impressed her as a man who had chosen a direction and would go along it without regrets, straight and honest, to the end of his days. Farming: the cold fields and the rain. Farming: the rough, recalcitrant cattle, the unpredictable returns, disease, short crops, high prices. Farming: worry and work.

"It wouldn't be my place, Mirrin. It would be our place. It would be our patch of ground, our standpoint. Whatever happened would be our doing. Aye, we would have good times as well as bad. God, if my thinking's right an' my back's as broad as it should be, then we would soon make it profit, our piece of good Scottish soil."

"How much do you know about cattle?"

"I can tell a bull from a cow," Tom said, with that cocky grin of his. "I'm no expert. But I've taken advice. I know what to buy an' how to keep. I can learn."

"Learnin' can be expensive."

"We can both learn."

"You want my answer?"

"Of course I do," Tom said. "Look here, Mirrin. It was luck that led you to Liverpool, right there at the end of the quay, like. Call it fortune, good fortune, if you prefer: an omen. If I hadn't found you in the 'Pool, then I'd have come lookin' for you. Believe it or not, flower, that was my intention all along."

"You might have told me before you left."

"I did — but you wouldn't listen. Besides, you were right. I was bein' daft an' impractical then. Romantic. It's very different now, though. I have capital enough to get me started. I want you t'share it with me. Do you have another feller?"

"I wondered when you'd ask that question, Tom."

"Do you?" Tom insisted, anxiously.

"No."

"Only the theatre?"

"It's as hard a taskmaster as the land."

"Maybe," Tom said. "But is it really for you?"

"I think it might be."

With an impatient gesture, Tom ground out the butt of his cigarette. "I'm not playin' a game with you, Mirrin. I'm not in a position to traipse round the country like a wee lap dog yappin' at your heels."

"You blow in out of the ocean, meet me, half by chance, an' expect me t'agree t'marry you, give up my career — which is satisfying, comfortable an' well paid — for the promise of matrimony an' a lifetime of sweat and tears."

"I'm hopin', Mirrin, that we'll manage more laughter than tears between us," Tom said. "As for the rest, aye, that's what I offer. I don't *expect* anythin'. I'm just puttin' it to you. I won't plead, or patter, or cajole. I won't hound you, or woo you. But I will marry you, just as soon as you wish, here or in Scotland; next week, or next year. I want you, Mirrin, that's the long and the short of it."

"A marriage made in Heaven?"

"Marriage isn't made anywhere but in the home; aye, an' it's a long, long manufacturing process," Tom said. "But it's you I want. I know we're right for each other."

"Give me a day or . . ."

"I'm leavin' tomorrow, Mirrin. I found you much quicker than I thought. I've said my say, an' I'm gettin' out of Liverpool an' up to where my heart is, aye, an' where my future'll be, just as soon as I can get on the train."

"Tomorrow? Oh, Tom, that's ridiculous. I can't possibly . . ."

"If you want me, Mirrin, you'll find me."

"But . . . but . . . where?"

"Lanark Hiring Fair: where we met."

"When?"

"You could give me an answer now."

"No, Tom. It wouldn't be true or honest."

"That's a fair answer, Mirrin."

"Will you look for another wife?"

"That's not for me: I won't look for a wife. There's a Hiring Fair held next January. I'll wait that long. I'll wait because it's you I want, nobody else."

"Well, I'll . . ."

"I'm not sneakin' off this time, Mirrin. I have a place to go, money to take me there, an' a purpose at the end of the journey." He got to his feet. "Now, I think it might be best if I escorted you back t'the Commercial."

With a vain attempt at humour, Mirrin said, "I think you might have t'carry me, Tom Dandy."

"Why?"

"I'm faint with shock," Mirrin said.

"It's better than bein' faint with hunger," Tom said, with a gravity that silenced Mirrin completely.

Mirrin wakened very early that Monday morning. It was still grey and overcast. She had it in mind to go to the railway station and give Tom a final answer, to tell him that she was no fool and would not be swept back into drudgery just because a tink said he loved her. But she did not go. She lay long in bed, awake, listening to the city come alive, trying to convince herself that Armstrong was just a day-dreamer, an opportunist, that once he had bedded her there would be no more talk of farms and Lanarkshire and matrimony, that he would drag her round the camps just like any scruff and, one day, would abandon her as he had done before. She wanted to believe it; but she could not. He had looked so different, still arrogant, to be sure, but leaner, quicker, less indolent and insolent. Long months at sea had somehow steeled him in his nebulous intention. Even Tom, it seemed, had changed.

Throughout that Monday, Mirrin sought his face, peering into the audiences hoping that he would have lingered on in Liverpool after all. She needed more reassurance, more persuasion.

But Monday passed, and Tuesday, Wednesday, and, by the week's end, she realised that he had kept his promise and left the next move to her. She did not for a moment doubt that Tom would find his farm to rent, buy his stock, make a go of it, or that he would attend the January Hiring Fair to give her a chance. She understood, however, that he would not come in search of her again no matter how much he wanted her. The offer would stand, for six months or a year, and then, in time, Tom would find himself another woman to be his wife and slave for him. Another woman, another fool.

No, she was a trouper now, a traveller, with golden opportunities spread out ahead of her like a carpet of pollen. Besides, she couldn't let Colcutt and Wilfrid down. That was her excuse for not obeying her madcap impulse to pack and follow Armstrong there and then.

Three

IT HAPPENED DURING rehearsals for the dance which concluded the troupe's rendition of 'Our Uncle Sam'. For weeks now Pru had been pale and listless. Even Wilf had been sufficiently disturbed at her pallor not to cut back on her participation in the more strenuous acts. There was no immediate warning of her collapse, however. So undemonstrative was it that a casual onlooker might have supposed it to be a piece of pantomime thrown in for an extra laugh.

Ada was at the piano, thumping out chords, while Blanche, Mirrin and Pru, arms linked, skipped in a rank across the front of the stage. Mirrin felt Pru's release, the gentle slipping of the small woman's arm, and turned, as Wilfrid yelled, in time to see Pru trip into the side curtain and slide down it, slowly, until she was seated with her legs stuck out before her, chin on breast, like a perfectly-mannered female inebriate.

Ada lumbered past before the Scots girl could react. Wilfrid was already advancing from his stance on a box in the orchestra trough. Blanche instantly began to weep.

"What's wrong? What is it?" Mirrin asked.

"Aunty's sick," Blanche sniffled. "It's happened before."

"She's fine: she's all right: she's just out of puff. Fetch a glass of water: brandy: bring some of the good stuff in my closet, Blanche. Fetch it, child." Wilfrid rapped out orders like a French general. He stooped by his wife's side and gingerly lifted Pru's chin with his forefinger, as Blanche hurried off to the dressing room. The hall sounded big, empty and hostile now that the gay tune had died; the troupers talked in whispers.

"She'll be all right, won't you, old gal?" said Wilf.

Ada said, "She won't be all right 'til she gets some proper est."

"I'm . . ." Pru gasped. "I'm . . . sorry."

"Sorry: nothing at all to be sorry for, luv," Ada said.

"That's the ticket," Wilf said. "Have a nice afternoon in bed. ou'll be right as rain for the evening."

Ada caught her husband by the lapels of his broad-cut jacket nd almost hoisted him over her shoulder. "What's got into you, Vilf Talboys? My sister's ill, *really ill*, an' you insist on her ppearin' tonight. Are you a monster?"

"No, I . . . yes, yes, of course, Pru. Take a week off; a fortnight. Iave a good lie-up. We'll struggle along . . ."

"A fortnight won't do, Wilf," Ada thundered.

"A month then. Stay off 'til we reach London. London'll perk ou up, old gal."

Fortunately Blanche arrived at that moment with a tumbler of randy and water which Ada held to her sister's lips. Pru managed o sip just a little of the liquid. Coughing harshly, she slumped nto her elbows. Ada cuddled the frail little woman while the pasm racked her.

"What'll we do without Pru?" Blanche sniffled. She too had een under strain lately, and was prone to burst into tears at the lightest excuse.

It occurred to Mirrin that in the ten months she had travelled vith the troupe they had performed or rehearsed virtually every lay, with the exception of an occasional Sunday. Naturally the train was telling. Even Ada had lost weight and Wilfrid now was s thin and nervous as a starved ferret.

"We'll rearrange the material," Mirrin said.

"An' put my sister in the first rubbish tip we come to, I supose," Ada snapped.

"I . . . I didn't mean that, Ada," said Mirrin.

"You're as bad as he is. Without you none of this would 'ave appened," Ada said.

"Please . . . Ada . . ." Pru's protests and peace-making intentions vere cut short by another bout of coughing.

"What have I got to do with it?" Mirrin demanded.

"Fillin' our Wilf's head with daft notions."

"Ada, that's unfair," said Wilf. "Without Mirrin's . . . er, assistance, we'd still be scratching in penny-gaffs up and down the Midlands. I mean, here we are . . ."

"Here we are — *killing my poor sister*," said Ada.

"It's just a cold, I tell you," shouted Wilf.

"I . . . can . . . get up now," said Pru. "I'm all right."

Wilfrid showed his contriteness by solicitude, fussing round the woman, placating his wife by an efficiency which did little to speed Pru from the Hippodrome to the Commercial Hotel.

When a hired cab had at last been dispatched with Ada and Pru inside, the three remaining members of the act stood disconsolately beneath the snout of the theatre, embarrassed by the memory of the truths that had been spoken in the heat of the moment.

"Not your fault, Mirrin: not anybody's fault," Wilf muttered. "Best see what we can do about salvaging the performance, eh? It'll keep our minds off our problems."

Blanche blew her nose loudly on her handkerchief. "Poor Aunty Pru. She's goin' to die. I know it. I heard her tell mother she was goin' to die."

"Stuff an' nonsense, child!" Wilf stormed. "Now get into that hall. Pru will be back with us very shortly. I know her. Stern stuff. The Cropleys are all made of the very best material."

"I don't want to rehearse," Blanche said. "I want to rest, too. I'm sick an' tired of all this, father."

Sighing, Wilf put his arm about his daughter's shoulders and sought to console her. "Yes, my dearest, I do understand how difficult it's been for us all to adjust to our new-found fame. But, believe me, once we get to London . . ."

"I don't want to go to London," said Blanche.

"You're just upset. Believe your Daddy, London's a wonderful place. Full of handsome, respectable young men."

"I have a young man already."

"Not that . . . that chippie from Brum?" Wilf cried.

"Marlingford. Henry Essam. My Henry."

"Your Henry! If he comes . . . within . . . a mile of . . ."

"Wilfrid," Mirrin warned, taking the trouper's arm. "I think you've said enough for the present."

"Take your hand off me, young woman. You're not the only star in this show. It's my . . . my talent and experience that have . . ."

"Yes, Wilf, I know," said Mirrin. "But we really had better stop squabblin' an' get on with revising the act, don't you think?"

"What? Yes, yes! Quite right! I apologise, Mirrin. Of course, we should. See, Blanche, that's the stuff that real music-hall favourites are made of: never too good, never too tired to polish up the silverware, hm?"

"Come on, Blanche," Mirrin said, with an effort at being cheerful. "We'll both need to sing twice as loud to make up for Pru, won't we?"

Reluctantly, Blanche allowed herself to be led into the hall again and, minutes later, had become involved in the rearranged song-and-dance sequences that Wilf and Mirrin cooked up between them to cover up the absence of Pru Cropley.

By evening Pru's condition had worsened. She was fevered and had difficulty in breathing, though the doctor's prognosis was that the fever was not unduly serious and that she would be up and about again in a week or ten days. It took all Wilf's persuasiveness to drag Ada to the theatre that night and the performance was the worst that the troupe had ever inflicted upon the public.

During the next three days it became apparent that the seams of Wilfrid's dream craft were leaking badly and that Pru's recovery to full health would be long delayed.

Off her own bat, Ada summoned another doctor, a very posh gentleman from Abercromby Square, who came in a magnificent brougham and wore a sleek tile hat and a flowing cape, as if he was off to the opera and not visiting a patient. It cost Ada three guineas for the consultation. But she counted every penny worth it, in spite of Wilf's howling protests that the doctor was nothing but a rich charlatan. Pru Cropley had lung congestion, allied to a slight but perceptible murmur of the heart.

"Rest and care are the remedies," the doctor declared, as he wrote out a sheaf of three prescriptions for the local pharmacist. "The linctus will ease the congestion; the powders will assist the fever to break, and the dark bottle will sympathise with her heart."

Ada and Blanche thanked the medical gentleman profusely. Warming a little to the anxious women, he added the rider that really drove Wilfrid wild: "She's too old for this profession."

"Pru too old? She's younger than I am," Wilf protested.

"Be that as it may. She must not be fatigued or over-excited ever again."

"Ever?" Wilf's voice was shrill as a piccolo.

"I suggest that a quiet and easy life be accorded Miss Cropley from now on, if that is possible," the doctor said, as he swept his tile onto his head and tapped it down. "Unless you want to be in mourning very soon indeed."

The door closed. All the other guests lurking in the parlours and lounges of the Commercial Hotel qualied as Wilf yelled, "*Quack!*" and stamped upstairs to lock himself in the bedroom in a fit of pique that would have done Blanche at her worst quite proud.

On Sunday Ockram came. He heard Wilf's tale of woe with customary implacability and even allowed himself to be edged away from the others into a corner for a private enclave during which Wilf did most of the muttering. As he left, Ockram turned and said, "About that other matter, Wilf?"

"Yes, Ockram?"

"I'll take it up with Mr. Colcutt."

"Ah, yes, fine."

"What other matter?" Ada asked.

Wilf refused to say.

In the early hours of Monday morning Pru's fever broke and the thick congestive phlegm which had choked her lungs was released. Throughout the night, Ada, Mirrin and Blanche attended the patient, bringing hot water and towels and pieces of rag to sponge her sweating skin, then cool water to bathe her brow.

By first house Monday Pru was obviously through the wood for the time being and slept peacefully enough while her companions somehow tottered through two evening performances with as much verve — as Wilf put it — as a trio of Egyptian mummies.

Over the weekend the weather had turned foul. Leaden skies released a continual downpour. Liverpool's sewers were swollen and overflowing, bringing a stench into every nook and cranny of the Hippodrome to add to the misery of damp dressing rooms and dank backstage corridors.

Like the others Mirrin too felt below par and had to hold a rein on her temper with the audiences. Merciless in their condemnation, as they had once been unstinting in their applause, the clients were noisy and impatient, stamping their feet, throwing things, and spoiling many of the songs by roaring the words all jumbled and out of tempo. Even Mirrin could not settle them and catch their interest, though she tried every ruse she had learned. She poured herself at them, twice nightly, with coquettish songs and sentimental ballads and a barrage of repartee which, if she had been less inflamed, might have evoked their good humour and earned their support. But Liverpool was not Grossby and the polish had gone off Talboys' family act. Even the finale, 'Our Glorious Empire', sounded like a funeral dirge.

Wilfrid called his family together and earnestly implored them to put 'more heart' into it. When that failed and the ticket receipts began to reflect a drop in takings, Wilfrid retaliated by purchasing, through Ockram, four new song sketches, three of which were tasteless, vulgar and bordering on the indecent. To Mirrin's disgust the audiences loved them and responded to every innuendo, every dirty wink and shake with a babble of obscene comment and gales of laughter. Even so ticket sales did not pick up much. Family parties thinned, making way for sailors and dockhands of the rougher sort who would stand for nothing but broadest comedy and as much ankle as they could persuade the girls to show beneath their dresses.

The month passed in disharmony and bickering. Unsettled feelings between the members of the family came to a climax a fortnight before the end of the booking. The only bright spot in the scene was that Pru's recovery was well advanced now and the 'snob' doctor had braved further insults to make a second and last call upon his frail little patient.

The final breakdown happened in the Hippodrome during a long Sunday afternoon rehearsal by means of which Wilf hoped to ginger his performers into redeeming the Liverpool booking at the last gasp.

"A finale," he raged. "I wouldn't call this a finale. Lord, we'll be lucky to finish at all. You, Mirrin, will you please not wander so far to the left?" He grabbed Mirrin's arm and swung her across the boards, then jerked her back sharply. "Come in there, come in."

"I'm not a bloody sheepdog, Wilf."

"Smile: smile: smile, *please*. Don't let it flag. You, Blanche, out to centre; slower, slower. Ada, come to the steps. Come *on*: come *on*: come . . ."

"NO!"

Paper-white, Ada clasped her hands in front of her breast and stood stock-still in stage centre.

"What did you say?" Wilf asked.

"NO."

"You'll have to."

"I *don't* have to."

"If we can't muster some discipline in Liverpool, how will we fare in London, I ask you?"

"Wilf, it's time to speak my mind," said Ada, with an effort at reasonableness. "I've talked it over with Blanche an' Pru an' WE-DON'T-WANT-TO-GO-TO-LONDON."

Though she spelled the words out loudly to ensure that her husband would understand, Wilf gawped at her in total disbelief.

"What are you sayin', Ada?"

"I'm sayin' what's been in my mind for half a year. We're not so young as we was, dear, an' it's time we all took a well-earned rest."

"Rest? But Ada . . . ?"

Crossing the stage the woman placed her hands on his arms and with great tenderness, said, "Thanks to you, luv, we've done well an' made a good livin'. We've given a lot of pleasure, too, in our day. But that day's done, Wilf. It's time to bow out, dear, don't you see?"

"Pru put you up to this, didn't she?" hissed Wilf.

"Pru had nothin' to do with it," said Ada. "She wouldn't oppose you; never has. It's my idea."

"But what'll we do? Live on air and old memories?"

"There are so many things we can do, dear. We all like the seaside. We could live there. Open up a teashop or a boarding house. Pru will soon be well enough to help out, an' . . ."

"Give up the theatre?" Wilf gasped. "Open a lodging house? I'd . . . I'd be just as bad as Ernest Dawson then."

"There's nothin' bad about bein' secure and happy."

"Ernest's not happy. He's miserable."

"We'd still be servin' the public, Wilf, but in a different way."

Wilf lost his temper. He stamped his foot petulantly and yelled into the empty gods. "I'll not be cheated at this stage in the proceedings. On the eve of goin' to London, you . . . you . . . turn against me. Blanche, you'll come with me, won't you?"

"Father, I . . ."

"London's not like what we've been used to. Fine shops there, comfortable rooms, parks. *Our* name printed large outside the theatre. I've dreamed about a city engagement for years, now you say you don't want to go. We've an obligation to Mr. Colcutt."

"For ten years, Wilf, Harrison Colcutt's never looked near us. We've taken the risks an' the knocks: he's taken the money."

"He came to visit us in Beale, didn't he?"

"Only because he saw an opportunity to exploit us."

"Exploit? He's giving us our big chance. Blanche, what do you say?"

"I'm not goin' to London, father," the girl declared. "I'm goin' to Marlingford to marry Henry Essam."

"You . . . you . . ."

"You can't prevent me."

"Don't you *care* about the theatre, the family act?"

"Not much," said Blanche. "It was your life. I never had no choice in the matter. Now I have. I'm of age to do as I like. No, I'll not be in London, that's a certainty."

Desperately, Wilf ran round the centre of the stage, gesticulating wildly and ranting at the deserted aisles, as if his mutinous family were there instead of by his side. "Good: good: we at least know where we stand. Better now than later. The Christmas Show at the Marylebone Road Pantheon, right in the palm of me hand, an' you scupper me! *You.* Me own *family!* Oh, that it should ever come to this!"

"Wilf, please: control yourself," said Ada.

"I will *not* be denied it. I will not be cheated of my Christmas Show. None of you deserve it. So, creep away to your seaside lodgin' houses an' your snivellin' carpenters. *I'll go myself.*"

Mirrin tried not to smile. The situation had no real humour in it, but she was reminded of her own father and mother, bristling and bawling. She stepped forward to calm the jabbering theatrical. "C'mon, Wilf. Why don't you an' Ada step out for a bite of dinner an' talk this over calmly."

She was startled at the speed with which Wilfrid swung on her. Eyes gleaming, as though possessed by a wonderful vision, he threw out his arms and embraced her. "Mirrin: *yes*: you and I! Of *course!* Colcutt never did want those others. He said so himself. It was your . . . *your* sparkle an' my experience that pulled us out of the gutter. Well, let's make it you an' I? We'll take the Pantheon by storm." He scrawled in thin air with a long forefinger, and intoned, "Wilfrid Talboys and the Songbird of the North."

"No, Wilf Talboys," said Ada, before Mirrin could reply. "Won't you listen t'sense, luv. It's just too late in comin'. You're too old t'start out anew. It's allers been a family act. But now Pru's sick: I'm weary, an' Blanche wants a life of her own. It's not the end of us, Wilf. We can settle in Marlingford, to be near Blanche and her husband. It's not the end. We have our nest-egg. We can still have a nice, comfortable life."

"Outside the halls?"

"It was good. But it's over, luv."

"*No.*"

Sadly, Ada said, "We're as determined as you are, Wilf. It's your choice now. You can have the loyalty and love of your family, or . . ."

Cheeks purple with rage, his chest heaving, with an inarticulate bellow, Wilf swung round and leapt down over the footlights into the shallow part of the orchestra trough and stalked, still shouting, up the centre aisle towards the doors. He barged through them into the grey twilight and disappeared into the street.

"I'm afraid we've hurt him deeply, luv," Ada said to Blanche.

"It had to be said," Blanche replied, gathering her coat, hat and gloves from the piano top. "He's had his own way too long."

"Should he be left alone?" Mirrin asked.

"Oh, he'll come round," Ada said, blinking back tears. "He's had a shock, that's all."

"What . . . what'll he do?" asked Mirrin.

"Don't you fret. Colcutt will see you right. It's really only you Colcutt wants, lass. I think Wilf senses that, too. The rest of us — including my poor husband — well, we're not much to write about. Not London material. You'll make it alone, Mirrin."

"But I don't want to make it alone."

Ada said, "You'd take Wilf from us?"

"That's up to Wilf," Mirrin said.

"No, luv, it's really up to you."

The ale-house was not respectable. Under normal circumstances Wilfrid Talboys would not have been found dead there, rubbing shoulders with hardened boozers and rowdy bargees. But it was any old port in a storm; he had half expected his family to come flying after him and had sought refuge in the first lighted hostelry he had come to. He hid himself in a corner, wretched, shivering with nervous exhaustion, and the shock of Ada's ultimatum.

Three tankards of strong ale warmed him, but did not ease his depression. He drank dourly, ignoring the other drinkers, hunched over his mug.

It should not have happened now, not with success just within reach. It was wrong and cruel of Ada, Pru and Blanche to desert him. What if Pru *was* a bit poorly. She wasn't essential to the act. She could travel with them, look after the costumes or something undemanding like that. They could afford to carry her for a while. He would never abandon her. Pru was just Ada's excuse.

Then there was Blanche, won away from him by a rabbit-chinned chippie from an east coast spa. What sort of viper had he reared? Was she so spoiled that she would grab a husband even at the peril of her whole family's career? More of the rod might have done the child good. Too late for that now.

He ordered, and drank a fourth tankard.

Mirrin Stalker: she was still on his side. Trust a Scotch lass to be loyal. Not even his flesh and blood. Still, Mirrin was all he needed to make a go of the London booking. The Londoners would adore her. Colcutt would have to make some adjustments, find replacements for Ada, Blanche and Pru. But that wouldn't be difficult. Indeed, it would probably benefit the act to have three younger women. Anger rose in him again. Ada had implied that he was old. By God, if he had her here now he would show her who was old.

Rapping the empty tankard on the table, he signalled to the landlord to bring him another throat-swab and when it duly arrived made swift inroads into it at once.

So what was it they wanted him to do? Him, Wilfrid Talboys, who had braved the wrath of his parents and the scorn of his mates to carve a career for himself on the music-hall stage. And he had almost succeeded. Almost reached the goal. Now they politely indicated that he was too old to enjoy the fruits of a lifetime's work, and had better bow meekly to his years and — of all things — open a teashop in Marlingford. Even a lodging house would be better. His friend Ernest made a tidy living out of a boarding residence; Marlingford was a better location than Grossby any day, especially in the high summer season. It was rumoured in knowledgeable quarters that now that the railway was in and new buildings springing up, Marlingford might become the Blackpool of the east coast. But he didn't believe it: nor did it matter much. He wouldn't be there. Not him. He'd be topping the Pantheon Christmas Show, basking in rapturous applause, taking bow after bow for the sketches with Mirrin. God, a teashop! Pink cakes, paper doylies and a parade of withered women nattering on about how they kept their hubbies under their thumbs — that was no choice.

Unasked, the landlord brought him a sixth tankard of ale. Hurriedly Wilf swallowed the remains of its predecessor.

"Pay the slate, old mate," the landlord suggested.

Fumbling, Wilf skidded his horseshoe purse across the table.

"Take what's due."

The landlord did so. Wilf continued to drink, more slowly now, with a certain effort of the gullet.

By God, what right had Ada to dictate to him? He would go straight back to the Commercial Hotel and have it out with her. Was he not the captain of his own ship? That's what he should have done earlier. No beating about the bush — London. He thumped his fist on the table. If Pru didn't like the idea of being a costume maid, then she could take her share of the savings and go off and bake pies, for all he cared. Good riddance!

Supporting himself on his hands, Wilf drew himself to his feet. The beams and floor of the tavern were all at sixes and sevens, tilted like the list of a ship at sea. Gaslamps were blossoming into fat orange trees dripping with dozens of round ripe fruit. He shook his head. Not that drunk, Wilf ol' boy. Can't be squiffed on a mere six tankards. Imbibe that many quarts and still walk the chalk line any day. He scrabbled for his purse, lifted it and shook it before him like a leper's bell. Not a sound. He let the purse yawn open, saw that it was empty. His forefinger probed into the depths. Yes, empty.

"Two pounds!" he said, indistinctly. " 'Ad two pounds."

Lurching to the counter where the landlord, rubbing his knuckles down the front of his buckram apron, waited, Wilf wagged the purse and shrilled, "*Robber! Thief! I 'ad two quid in 'ere.*"

"Who the bliddy 'ell be you callin' a thief?"

"Six shillings I owe. You took two pounds."

"Six shillings I took."

"D'you know whom you are addressin'."

"I don't care if you're the ghost o'Prince Albert, you owed six shillings an' I took six shillings; notter penny more."

"*Fetch me a constable,*" Wilf shouted.

"Fetch one yourself," the landlord said. "I'll help y'on your way."

Wilf had the strange sensation of reverting to a previous moment in his life when he had ventured on to the stage of the Palace in Newcastle as a volunteer assistant to an aerialist whose partner had fallen sick. He had flown through the air, like a parrot glued to its perch, while the woman — strong as an ox she was — gripped his wrists and hissed at him to keep still. His flight across the taproom of the Liverpool hostelry was much shorter and the landing much ruder. He struck the sawdust, damp and sodden by the door, and went skidding on out on his rump straight across the rainy pavement to sprawl headlong into the gutter.

Only his drunkenly relaxed state saved him from injury. As it was, the knees were torn from his trousers and his jacket was ripped. He sustained shallow grazes upon his palms which bled considerably and added an horrendous touch to the portrait of wrecked humanity he presented when, some twenty minutes later, he barged into the dining room of the Commercial Hotel in Linden Street, wrestling with the manager of the establishment who had tried to prevent him crossing the foyer, and bellowed, "ADA."

The diners jumped. The ladies covered their mouths with their fans and the gentlemen, who were not really in the white tie class, pretended that they were and rose, with dignity, to defend their families and companions from the nightmarish intruder.

"Mr. Talboys: Mr. Talboys: really, sir, I must . . ."

"Shurrup! ADA."

"How dare you, you ruffian."

"I want Ada."

"*Father!*"

"BLANCHE! WHERE'S YOUR MMMMOTHER?"

Daughter and sister-in-law advanced on Wilf from a corner table to which secluded nook the theatricals had been gently eased early in their stay.

"Wilf Talboys, you're drunk," Pru stated.

"DRUNK BUT DETERMINED: Y'HEAR ME?"

"Go upstairs, father, this minute."

Even through an alcoholic fog, Wilf knew that he had overstepped the mark. The expression on his daughter's face was enough to chill even the hottest rage. Sobriety rushed upon Wilf Talboys.

Even as Blanche reached for him, he made one last ale-inspired attempt to rule the roost again, puffing himself up like a cock pigeon and jutting his chin out. "Are y'sorry?"

"I . . . I . . ." Blanche was flabbergasted at the audacity.

"Well, I'll forgive you," Wilf announced. "I'm a genn'ous man. We'll say n'more about it. I'll even consider lettin' you come t'London wi' Mirrin an' me."

Eloquent gestures of clemency overbalanced him. Blanche had little alternative but to clasp him in her arms, just as Ada and Mirrin, who had been delayed for dinner, arrived in the room.

But Wilf did not notice them. Abruptly he succumbed to the pressures of strong ale and blind rage, and swooned clean away.

It was all Blanche could to to support him until Mirrin, Ada and the hotel manager, acting without much harmony, managed to drag the bedraggled trouper out of the dining room and up two flights of stairs to his bed.

Even the light of a single candle made his eyes throb and his head ache. His mouth was parched, his throat gritty, as if he had eaten handfuls of wet sand.

"Ada?" he croaked. "Aaaaada?"

Mirrin smiled thinly. "Not so chipper now, Wilf, are you?"

"I . . . I want my Ada."

"That won't be so easy. They've left, all three of them."

Wilf sat bolt upright, like Lazarus summoned from the dead. His mouth sagged open, then formed into a long oval of numb pain. He clapped his shaky hands to the crown of his head as if to hold his skull in place.

"Lie down, Wilf," Mirrin said. "You're not recovered yet."

Stiffly Wilf allowed the girl to coax him back against the pillow of the hotel bed.

A small china jug steamed on a ring over the candle. He could smell coffee. The very aroma made him nauseous, as Mirrin tapped off a cup and held it, black and scalding, to his retreating lips.

"Drink it."

"Nooooooo."

"Drink it, or I'll pour it on your head."

Shuddering, Wilf took the liquid into his mouth and allowed it to trickle over his gorge. Remorselessly Mirrin pressed more upon him until the invalid cup was empty.

Wilf groaned. "Really . . . really left?"

"Oh, don't panic: they haven't deserted you. We've all been politely requested to take ourselves off from the Commercial. You did create rather a scene down there in the dining room. Ada, Pru and Blanche didn't feel like brazening it out. I persuaded the manager to allow you to stay until you'd recovered your senses."

"Wah' . . . what time?"

"It's after eleven."

"I don't . . . don't know what came over me." Wilf shook his head, then clutched it again instantly. "Give me . . . more of that stuff, Mirrin, please."

A second cup of coffee revived him enough to listen intelligently to the girl.

She said, "They're not far away. Just down the road at the George."

"I . . . feel awful."

"I'm not surprised. But I haven't much sympathy, Wilf; not for you. Not only did you give your devoted family a humiliating experience tonight, you've driven them far too hard for far too long."

"You too," Wilf said. "But you don't complain."

"I can take it," Mirrin said. "But I'll tell you this, Wilfrid Talboys, you'd need the constitution of a coal-heaver to survive this theatrical life for long."

"Yes, it's . . . it's hard. But it's rewarding."

"I've made a bit of silver, Wilf, I'm not denyin' it. But money's not what I want."

"I . . . I see."

Mirrin watched him. Sympathy for Pru and Ada was uppermost in her mind, but there was an irritated compassion for Wilf Talboys, too. As Ada said, she had come into their lives too late. So caught up with his ambition was Wilf that he could not discern what Ada saw so clearly, that they had given their youth to the pursuit of fame and glory only as an excuse to do what they really wanted to do. The fame, the glory, these were mere rationalisations to succour them when times were hard. Everyone needed that kind of vindication for waywardness, for risk, for embarking on a search that could never have an ending. In striving, the Talboys had found happiness and love. But it was over. It was time to change the scene, choose a ballad now to sing them out, not a jig.

Aye, Mirrin thought, I have looked down that road myself, not knowing what I really wanted, made blind by half-forgotten fears, daft pride and vanity. She had shut her mind to Tom's sincerity, a year ago, a whole tapsalteerie year ago. It had been a wild, mad, gay ride, but it was time for her to dismount now. Sense and instinct told her where she belonged — not in London, not even in England, but back home, with her own hard-working down-to-earth kind, in Lanarkshire.

Tom had chased away the spectre of the pit. It was the pit she had really hated, its haunted shafts and perpetual filth. He had sold her, without even trying, the vision of green earth, and the enduring quality of that earth, tangibly handed down from generation to generation. He had spoken of sweat and tears — aye, there would be plenty of those, for sure — but he had not played on the romantic in her, nor lured her with talk of the land in spring, or the freedom of working for one's own destiny.

She loved that passion in men, a fire of enthusiasm that did not dwindle when the rain of reality fell. Aye, Tom might talk practical, but his promise to her, his demand on her, was seeded still in dreams.

"It's not for Ada's sake, Wilf; no, nor for yours. I'm goin' home," she said, softly, "because I want to."

"When?"

"When this engagement's over."

"How can you turn your back on . . . ?" Wilfrid sighed. "Hah! I'm a fine one to ask that question. All that . . . that fuss tonight, Mirrin, that's *my* way of turnin' my back on London. Ada won't change her mind. She never has. She's stuck by me, indulged me through thick and thin. If the old gal says it's time to hang up the costumes, then it is. I know it too."

"Who'll tell Colcutt?"

"Don't fret about him," said Wilf. "I could never pick when to work for him, but, dash it all, Mirrin, at least I can pick my time to stop."

"Wilf, I'm sorry."

"Is it the love of some man or other that takes you off home?"

"It is."

"Well, I can't say I blame you," Wilf told her. "I suppose it's difficult to settle at your age. Ay, but it would have been grand to see you at the top, lass."

"Maybe I will be yet, Wilf, though not on a stage."

Wilf nodded. "That's true. Spirit will out, whether you choose it or not."

"At least, Wilf, we'll go out with a bang."

"I already have," the trouper said.

But they did not go out with a bang. Audiences in Liverpool were not forgiving. The last shows of the Talboys' career were not brightened by much applause. Ockram accepted Wilf's verbal 'resignation' with surly ill-grace. For days the company lived in a state of dread lest Harrison Colcutt once more dragged himself from his lair, this time to blackmail them into fulfilling the London engagement. It was the dread which indicated, even to Wilf, that the theatre had lost every last ounce of its charm for his family. Truth was thrown into high relief by the removal of the burden of endless shows and rehearsals. Ada was once more jolly, and Blanche showed a loving side to her nature. Both women were particularly attentive to Wilf. By nature Wilf Talboys had always been ebullient. Even before Mirrin's departure for Scotland, the morning after the final curtain, he had thrown himself wholeheartedly into plans for a different kind of future, that of boarding-house keeper.

Money was not a major problem. Blanche and Pru would go on ahead to Marlingford, to reside, for a while, with Henry Essam's family, while Ada and Wilf took themselves back to Grossby, to 'study' under the Dawsons and, Wilf predicted, to spend a very merry Christmas, indeed. At the start of the year, the couple would make for Marlingford in search of a little bit o'property. The sea air would soon make Pru well again, and the marriage between Blanche and her faithful carpenter would keep Ada occupied. And, if the little Palace theatre in the resort did happen ever to need a concert party of some experience and repute, then . . .

Mirrin remembered her theatrical family in tableau as they stood behind the railing in the railway station. It had been a hectic last hour, with Wilf overseeing the stowing of Mirrin's boxes into the guardsvan, and Ada and Pru ascertaining that she had plenty of things to eat during the long journey north. But when that was all done and the engine building steam and carriage doors slamming and porters' whistles shrilling, Mirrin found them strangely still.

"I hate farewells," Ada said. "I've had so many of them, luv. Each one becomes so much harder than the last."

The plump homely woman sniffed and dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief. Pru and Blanche, too, shed tears. Wilf was there to comfort them, to ginger their flagging spirits with a secret jest. He would always be a man for tomorrow, an eternal optimist who would dream his dreams until the day he died.

Mirrin had known many kinds of dreamer, met many travellers in a year that had been full of excitement and emotion. She had learned the hard way that change was the prerogative of everyone, and that a dream could be the root of worthwhile realities. Houston, Wilf, Blanche, and Tom, her Tom. Lord, did Tom Dandy know what he had taken on?

Suddenly she swung away from the barrier and hurried along the platform, pausing at the carriage door to look back. They had gone, all of them, vanished. Surprised and just a little hurt, Mirrin peered through wreathes of steam and smoke until the guard told her to hurry on, and the tall, imperious blast of the engine's whistle made her quickly pick up her skirts and find her seat inside.

That, however, was not quite the last of the Talboys. For there they were again, breathless and flushed, at the very end of the long platform, having hurried round by the shunter's gate. As the train chugged and heaved to gather speed, they stood in line under a handpainted banner, arms linked, singing to the weeping girl who had passed through their lives like a falling star.

Though she could not hear the words, the tune rang in Mirrin's head. Stippled out in blue distemper on the long white canvas prompter, it said,

THEN LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR AS YOURSELF
AS THE WORLD YOU GO TRAVELLING THROUGH,
AND NEVER SIT DOWN WITH A TEAR OR A FROWN,
BUT PADDLE YOUR OWN CANOE.

GOOD LUCK AND GOD BLESS.

Yes, Mirrin thought, she would paddle her own canoe all right, back home in Scotland. But, come the January Hiring Fair, she would no longer do it alone.

Four

NOVEMBER GROWLED, OLD and irascible, in the community consciousness. Dusk came early. The sky above the town was dim and cold, promising a frosty night. But there was light enough for all to see the sight that set the tongues wagging. The glow of lanterns and lamps that strung the pithead workings was augmented by limelights bushed above the gates through which the sorters hurried from their shift at the shutes and the next batch of underground workers trudged from their warm firesides.

The bold brass neck of the returning prodigal created a stir that was more than a nine days' wonder and passed quickly down into the town's mythology, sustained by the events that Mirrin powered in the weeks following her homecoming.

"What's that?"

"Where?"

"There, at the gate yonder. Is it Edith Lamont spyin' on her hubby?"

"In that hat?"

"My God! It's Mirrin Stalker. Would y'credit it? Look, look at that conveyance. Must have cost a fortune t'hire."

"My, but she's a brazen bitch!"

"She's come back for the bairn. I said all along it was hers."

"Here, I wonder if Kate knows."

"Kate? Kate? See, there's your sister."

"There, Kate, waitin' at the gate for you, like the Queen o'Sheba."

The sleek black four-wheeler had been hired in Hamilton. That, at least, had been deliberate. It did not occur to Mirrin now to seek out some rumble cart to transport her bandboxes and valises from Hamilton station. She had the money and she had the style — and she was mischievous enough not to ignore an opportunity.

She had spent the best part of two days travelling, putting up at a change-hotel, not hurrying. She was damned if she would sneak in at the back door of the narrow house. She was not ashamed of the rewards of her stint in the south, and knew enough of the mores of Blacklaw to be certain that the villagers would have misinterpreted her success. There was, too, the matter of Drew's child, the poor bastard mite that had been wished on to her, to protect her dear brother's good name. Besides, it gave her pleasure to sit high in Hamilton's best hired carriage and watch the countryside go past, nostalgic as any homecoming traveller who had been away for such a time.

The day dress with matching jacket was less expensive than it looked. The velvet Rubens hat and its silken streamers had cost almost as much. The mound of luggage in the carriage boot was tall enough to be roped. Seated behind the driver, watching the gate, Mirrin nodded without undue effusion, to folk she had once called her friends, who now skirted the hackney carriage as if it was a plague cart.

Then Kate came, running, skirts held up. She stopped at the carriage step.

"Mirrin?"

"Aye, it's me, luv."

"You've come home."

"For a while. Here, climb aboard."

"Me? But . . . but I'm all mucky."

"The upholstery'll clean."

"Mirrin, I . . ."

"Get up."

Reluctantly, Kate scrambled up into the carriage and Mirrin instructed the driver to take them down Main Street.

"Mirrin, you look so . . . so different."

"Fatter?"

"No, but . . . different."

"How's Mam?"

"She's well enough. I wish . . . I wish you hadn't met me at the colliery, though."

"Why not?"

"Everybody's starin'."

"Let them stare."

"But . . ." Kate stammered. "There's somethin' you should know."

"The baby?" Mirrin said. "They think it's mine. Well, let them think what they like."

Kate's cheeks were scarlet. She cringed into the corner of the leather seat, especially when Mirrin waved to acquaintances on the pavement, women and men who paused and gaped open-mouthed as the grand carriage rolled on downhill towards the bottom of the row.

"Stop it, Kate," Mirrin said, softly. "Stop glowerin' at me. Aren't you pleased I've come home?"

"Oh, Mirrin! I've never been so glad t'see anyone in my life."

"That's nice t'know," Mirrin said, then added, "but I suspect it means you've got problems. Who is it this time? Drew again?"

"It's Betsy."

"Betsy?" Mirrin leaned across the seat to squeeze Kate's hand. "Never mind. I think *I* can handle that young lady."

Then the reserve between the sisters vanished and they hugged each other, glad to be together again, in spite of the changes that the months had wrought upon them both and on the township through whose twilight streets they rode in such awfully public view.

The whole town was buzzing with the news. Callum Ewing took it upon himself to tell his son, dropping the information at dinner with a casualness that belied the anxiety the old miner felt.

"So, Rob, she's back."

"Is she now? How did she look?"

"Fine."

"That's good," Rob Ewing said, then, with equal casualness, "Pass me the tatties, Da'."

It was Anna Thrush who told Edith. The housekeeper collared the bustling little mistress of the mansion in the hallway as she, Edith, hastened to keep a dinner engagement in the house of the Reverend Durley, also a coalmaster of sorts and much interested in reform, who lived rather grandly in Glenryan some ten miles to the west.

"I do not really see what that piece of gossip has to do with me," Edith Lamont said to her housekeeper.

"I imagined that you might be interested," Anna said. "She used to work here, I believe."

"All *that* is in the past, Anna."

"My informant tells me that she arrived in an expensive carriage, laden with expensive luggage."

"Perhaps she has snared another fool."

"*Another* fool?" said Anna, pointedly.

"Is my carriage waiting?"

"For the past half hour."

"I may be late in returning, Anna: there is no need to wait up."

"Very good, madam," Anna said.

Edith Lamont paused in the doorway and, without looking round, said, "Where is Mr. Lamont tonight?"

"At a meeting, in Hamilton."

"Alone?"

"Sydney is with him."

"Thank you, Anna."

"Goodnight, Mrs. Lamont."

"Goodnight."

Sydney Thrush learned of Mirrin Stalker's arrival soon after the event became public. He had it from Davy Dunlop who had it from a weasel-like clerk who had been so agog that he had returned to the managers' office specifically to broadcast the amazing fact, though neither man was aware of its significance in respect of their boss. Though he had never clapped eyes on Mirrin Stalker, Sydney Thrush was acquainted, chapter and verse, with much of Lamont's stormy relationship with the girl. Long ago, Thrush had marked the collier's daughter as a wayward factor in governing the coalmaster's behaviour.

After Lamont's return from his long trip to Holland and Yorkshire, Sydney had noted dramatic changes in the man. By probing and prying, he had gathered sufficient data to ascertain that Lamont had spent part of that summer in this Stalker girl's company.

Volatile relationships within the mansion had settled soon after

Lamont's return. The coalmaster, though sour and moody, was no longer a recluse, and had almost given up drinking. Indeed, he attacked the business of pit profits with a zeal that Thrush could only admire, the more so as it married well with his own management policies. Since then, throughout the autumn, owner and manager had pulled like matched horses against the vagaries of the market and sullen work-force, gaining ground all round and increasing the monthly profit by dunning the colliers still further into subjection and by meting out harsh justice to radicals, militants and to shirkers.

Nonetheless, Sydney Thrush was apprehensive when he imparted the news of the Stalker girl's return to his superior. He waited until the droning speeches and interminable, fatuous arguments which concluded dinner in the hotel were over and port and the brandy were, by tradition, circulating, before he murmured in Lamont's ear: "By the way, sir, I hear that the girl Stalker came home this afternoon."

The brandy glass paused and, instantly, a slight trembling of the hand slopped the amber liquid in the bowl. Houston Lamont, who, a few minutes before, had been the personification of a powerful and self-assured ruling class, seemed to slacken, as if Thrush had cut a mainstay which held all the parts of his stern personality together.

"Are you . . . are you certain, Thrush?"

"Quite certain, coalmaster," Thrush answered, and went on to explain what he knew of the circumstances of Mirrin Stalker's return. Lamont listened with an avidity that brooked no interruptions, his sad eyes bright again, a strange smile upon his lips.

"She had luggage, you say?"

Thrush nodded. "A great heap of it."

"Then she intends to stay."

"Perhaps she's like your good lady wife, sir," Thrush said, "and travels with more than she needs."

"No, not Mirrin," Lamont said. "She's come home for good."

"Coalmaster, if you'll excuse my impertinence, what are the Stalkers to you?"

"That," said Houston Lamont curtly, "is none of your concern, Thrush."

"You gave them a house."

"They pay for it."

"And there's the lad in Edinburgh, living on your patronage."

"A charitable gesture, that's all."

"There's a rumour that this Mirrin girl is the mother of the child in the Stalkers' house: what truth . . . ?"

"No truth whatsoever, Thrush," Lamont said. "Now, fill my glass if you please."

Thrush poured a fresh brandy for his boss without another word on the subject which, as the coalmaster had just reminded him, was none of his business. It was ironic, however, that he should never have met this woman, this *femme fatale*, who if he played his cards correctly, might help in his plan to acquire effective control of Blacklaw colliery and all the power that went with it.

Mirrin had been home for five days. The villagers were bitterly disappointed that they had seen no sign of her about the streets. She kept to herself, locked indoors, it was said, because she was ashamed. Maybe she was pregnant again. But that did not reconcile with her grand entry. Other coteries in Blacklaw were of the opinion that Mirrin was just biding her time.

Those few who had the temerity to quiz Kate at the sorting troughs were given the blunt answer that Mirrin was indeed home for a short holiday before returning to London. Those who had the courage to ruffle Mam Stalker's feathers by enquiring after her middle daughter's health and welfare were sent off with a flea in their lugs.

On the surface Mirrin's return made no difference to Mam and Kate. The old woman continued with her round on the baker's van, Neill Campbell Stalker, sitting up and taking more notice of his surroundings now, still with her. Kate turned up for her shift each morning, as always, on time, and called in on Willie Kellock each evening on her way home. It was the third adult member of the Stalker household who was most shaken by her sister's return. She discussed its implications thoroughly with her friend and mentor, Mr. Randolph Newton, as they lay in bed in the hotel in Glasgow that Wednesday night.

"Why are you so afraid, Betsy?"

"Mirrin's always been a dragon."

"I thought you said she had changed and mellowed."

"Changed but not mellowed. My brother and I have never been held in much favour by her."

"That hardly surprises me. If your twin is anything like you, Betsy, then he must rub your conventional family quite the wrong way."

"Randolph, it isn't a joking matter."

"Do you think that she suspects — about our relationship?"

"It's . . . possible," answered Betsy. "Kate's been very icy t'me this past few months."

"How the devil could they have found out?"

"God knows!" said Betsy.

For some time Randolph said nothing, lying on his back staring at the ceiling. Abruptly he pushed himself from the bed and crossed, naked, to the table to pour himself wine. Sipping it, he said softly, "It may be time for us to part, my love."

"Yes, that had occurred to me, too," said Betsy.

"I shall miss you, you know."

"You'll find another mistress easy enough."

"But not one like you."

"I take that as a glowin' compliment."

"Do you regret what's happened?"

"On the contrary," said Betsy. "You've taught me a lot, Randolph."

"That *is* immodest."

"I don't mean just here, in bed," the girl replied. "You've taught me that daft inhibitions bred into girls like me from birth are nothin' at all. An' you've taught me that I can look out for myself too, without goin' to the dogs."

"Don't you feel like a 'ruined woman'?"

"Not in the least."

Randolph sighed. "I will be sorry not to see you again."

"A clean break is best. It was, after all, that kind of relationship, was it not?"

"Yes, I suppose it was."

Betsy sat up, hair bobbing, her face beaming with astonishment. "You *like* me. I never realised it before. It wasn't just what I gave you, was it? You actually like me? A man o'the world, like you."

Randolph laughed ruefully. "Yes, I like you. Not because you're beautiful and co-operative, and certainly not because you're nice."

"Why then?"

"Because you have no scruples at all."

"*Thank you!*"

"You're not reckless, or feckless, but you are strong, Betsy Stalker. Don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise."

"Is this to be the last time?"

"Yes."

"It's just as well," said Betsy. "I'm becoming too dependent on you."

"Now," said Randolph, returning to the bed, "let's see what I can do for you, to honour my side of the bargain."

"You've given me quite enough."

"Edinburgh," Randolph said, "is an expensive city."

"My brother will look after me."

"No, no, my love," Randolph said. "You must learn to look after yourself."

"Come t'think of it, you're right again."

"I like to flatter myself," Randolph said, "that I have given you your start in life."

"And what have I given you?"

"Pleasure," said Randolph Newton.

"Has that been enough?"

"More than enough, I assure you."

Betsy sighed. "At least," she said, "we still have the rest of the night."

"That's true," Randolph said and, turning, took her tenderly in his arms.

Mirrin could not adjust to the narrow house. She felt constricted by it, imprisoned. Its snugness gave her no comfort. In her heart she knew that this period marked the end of her youth. Blacklaw was almost behind her, the old Blacklaw, the Blacklaw of her childhood. At last she had really put herself apart from it, beyond it. The admission made her just a little sad. It was a door she could not re-enter, that simple workaday existence with its upheavals, minor intrigues, strange rules and almost holy rituals.

Behind her too were all the roads she had not taken, all the opportunities that she had passed by. Life she supposed was full of such doubts and lingering regrets, too rich a thing in its essence to commit lightly to one course. Tom had tried to explain it to her, at the *Creagan* inn that distant autumn night, but she had not had sufficient experience to accept it then. "Each time I come home, the grip has loosened." That was true.

Never mind, Tom Dandy! If her trust in him was honoured, he would have a lifetime to explain it to her come the day of the hiring fair.

Mam, Kate, and Betsy too, seemed infected by the impermanence of things. Perhaps Mirrin's newfound poise disconcerted Flora, who had taken so long to adjust to the tomboyish qualities in her daughter.

Betsy was polite, curious about her time on the stage, but cautious, bearing out Kate's suspicions that the young girl was, perhaps, involved in an affair that had gone beyond the hand-holding and cuddling romances that were to be expected at eighteen. To Kate's chagrin, Mirrin did not broach the subject with her young sister.

During those first few days, apart from exchanging news with her mother and sisters, she touched not at all upon her reasons for her sudden return. As November gripped more tightly, and Mirrin showed no inclination to begin digging in again, Kate became anxious, and testy. She had expected Mirrin to cut through their problems like a sword. Such passivity, such patience, were unusual traits in Mirrin. Kate was irritated by them.

Neill was bathed and fed and put down in the cradle by the hearth. Attentively his eyes followed the play of the firelight upon the brass smoke canopy and the flicker of the lamp upon the plates on the dresser. Kate knelt by the cradle, hand upon her nephew's shoulder. He liked that comforting touch in the minutes before sleep claimed him. Flora was seated in the upright chair that had once belonged to Alex, but which, under her weight, had sagged into bulging middle-age. The house was not so neat as it had once been; Flora had grown careless of things since she had taken the job at Kellocks and since Neill had arrived on the scene. From the dissolving crystal of the family, Flora too had formed an independent identity.

When Neill was fast asleep, and Kate and Mirrin had carefully carried the cradle into the bedroom and returned, Kate said, "You've never told us yet, Mirrin, why you've come back home?"

"Now's as good a time as any, I suppose," Mirrin said. "I've come home to marry."

"You?" Mam exclaimed, colour draining from her face. "Marry? Who? What . . . what man?"

"Tom Armstrong's his name."

"That tink lad you told us about?" said Kate.

"He's no tink now," Mirrin said. "He's goin' into farmin'."

"Where?"

"In these parts."

"But . . . but where is he?" said Flora.

"I don't know," said Mirrin. "I've to meet him at Lanark Hiring Fair in January. We'll marry then — if he still wants me."

"Oh, God!" said Mam. "Our Mirrin marryin' a tink."

"Would you rather I'd married a coalmaster?"

Kate glanced sharply at her sister. "No, Mirrin," she murmured. "Don't."

"Why not?" Mirrin said. "I could have gone off with Houston Lamont, Mam. He wanted me, too."

"*I don't want t'hear: I don't want t'hear,*" Flora groaned.

"Aye, Lamont," Mirrin went on. "It's because of him, in a way, that I'm here now."

"What are y'sayin', Mirrin?" Flora said.

Calmly, Mirrin went on. "What's so shocking about that? I had a love . . . a time of love with Houston; when I worked in the mansion."

Flora began to weep, but oddly there was no real hurt or shame in it. After a moment, wiping her eyes on her cuffs, she ceased shedding tears, and, instead, indulged a cautious curiosity about the daughter she had never understood.

Mirrin said, "It's no great surprise to you, Mam, I'm sure. You heard the rumours. Maybe you chose to close your ears t'them, but you knew that they were true in part."

"Why do you tell me now, Mirrin?" asked Flora.

"What I did then, I did for you, for all of you; Drew in particular," Mirrin said. "Och, it was no great act of sacrifice. I thought I was in love with Houston Lamont. I *was* in love with him — *then*. It wasn't the loving that drove the bargain, but the parting."

"Why didn't you tell me, Mirrin?" Flora asked.

"Because you wouldn't have understood."

"But you tell me now? Have I changed that much?"

"Aye, you have, Mam: we all have."

"Because of Neill?" said Kate. "That's your reason, Mirrin, is it not?"

"You were willin' to shield Drew by lettin' the lie stand, the lie that Neill was my child," Mirrin said.

Flora opened her lips to protest.

"Maybe you didn't say it, but you didn't deny it," Mirrin continued. "I was safe away: I had a 'bad name' anyway. It was only Mirrin. It didn't matter much what folk thought of her."

"I never . . . never told a soul that Neill was your baby," Flora said.

"But did you ever, once, deny it, Mam?" Mirrin said. "Or you, Kate? Did you tell anyone the truth?"

"Drew's so young," Kate said.

"He's what we made him."

"We're finished with him now," Kate said. "I made that clear when I took Neill away."

"We're not finished with Drew," Mirrin said. "God help us, but I wonder if we'll ever be finished with him."

"Are you weddin' this tinker out of spite, Mirrin?" Flora asked.

"I'm marryin' Tom Armstrong out of love."

"Is he the best you can do?" Flora demanded waspishly.

"That's it, Mam: that's what's wrong with you, *and* this damned town. I'm pegged t'a station, t'a manner of behaviour. Well, I never could thole it. I had to leave to find out the truth. Now, I know what I am. I'm Blacklaw — yet I'm not Blacklaw. I'm Alex Stalker's daughter — yet I'm not like my Da'. I'm Flora Stalker's middle girl — but I'm not like you either. I'm all of these things, yet I'm an individual. I can choose t'be what I wish."

"A tinkie wife?"

"If you call him a tink again, mother," Mirrin snapped, "I'll walk out that door right now an' that'll be an' end of it."

"Is he a good man, Mirrin?" Kate asked.

"He's as good a man as I'll ever want," Mirrin replied. "He'll look after me."

"Is that all that matters?" Kate asked.

"Look, luv, I *picked* Tom," Mirrin said. "It's not like it would have been if I had married Rob. That would have been because I had little or no choice. But choice is given t'all of us, if we're bold enough t'take it. Don't you see that yet? Don't you see that we're all of us drifting, that only when some terrible event rocks us do we ever consider change. Look at you, Mam."

"What have I done?"

"Changed."

"I'm old now, Mirrin, an' widowed. You've no right t'accuse [illegible]"

"I'm not accusin' you, Mam. You've got your job at the baker's, an' you've got wee Neill t'raise, an' love."

"Is that so dreadful?" said Kate.

"But you really didn't much care how you got him," said Mirrin. "Look round you. See them, the boys and the girls, my age, not so much older, aged already, beginnin' t'decay. But we Stalkers called a halt to that process, each one of us."

"Except me," said Kate, dolefully.

"Find out what you want, Kate, an' you can have it."

"I don't believe that."

"Pick, choose, change, decide, act," said Mirrin, with some of her former vehemence. "I'll have my Tom, my farmer."

"An' what about us?" said Flora.

"That's really why I came home," said Mirrin. "We're in debt, in debt t'each other. And in debt to Houston Lamont."

"But he *gave* us life-lease on the house?" said Flora.

"I want freed from that bargain, Mam," Mirrin said. "I'm not dishonest enough t'trade on a man's feelings or capitalise on hope any longer."

"What are y'sayin', Mirrin?" Flora cried.

"I'm sayin' that we must give up this house."

"*My house? My home?*" Flora struggled to her feet.

"It was too much, Mam: it cost us too much."

"You were born here, all of you. I came here as a young bride wi' Alex."

"It's dead, Mam. My Da's dead, an' all the house ever meant is gone. It was never our house, anyway. It was always Lamont's."

"But he *gave* it to us," said Flora. "He won't go back on his word."

"Aye," said Mirrin, quietly now, "I think he will."

"Why, Mirrin?" said Kate.

"Because he believes I've come back for *him*."

"But . . . but he's married," said Flora. "A married man?"

"What'll we do, Mirrin. How will we live?" Kate said.

"Honestly," Mirrin replied.

Flora said, "Aye, it's all very well for you, with this tink lined up t'give you a bed an' provide for you."

"I want t'be clean again, Mam," Mirrin declared. "I *won't* live like a hypocrite any longer."

"So for your own selfish reasons you'd see your mother an' wee Neill flung out . . ."

"Stop it, Mam," Kate said. "Mirrin's done more for us than we ever had a right t'expect. It's true what she says. We traded away the last of her good name in this town just t'protect Drew: aye, an' t'give us a baby, a child t'nurse. We're the ones who've been selfish, not our Mirrin."

Flora groped behind her and lowered herself into the chair.

"I won't abandon you, Mam," Mirrin promised. "I've some money saved. It's not enough t'give you a secure future, but it means that we don't have to rush into anythin'."

"It's not much we'd be askin', Mirrin: a roof an' a job," Kate said.

Mirrin chuckled ruefully. "That's the whole story in a nutshell, Kate: a roof an' a job. Well, there's one thing you haven't thought of."

"What's that?" asked Kate.

"Drew."

"Drew?"

"It's time our dear brother paid his debts."

"But Drew's only a student," said Kate.

"What can he do for us?" Mam asked.

"That," Mirrin replied, "remains t'be seen."

Five

THROUGHOUT THEIR FAMILY life together Mirrin and Betsy had hardly spent an hour alone and had certainly never engaged in such a frank tête-à-tête as occupied them on the journey from Hamilton to Edinburgh. Mirrin had been conscious of changes in Betsy, of how similar the girl had become, in many respects, to her twin brother. It seemed that all along shrewdness had been lying below Betsy's flightiness. Now they talked like women of equal experience. Of course, Betsy was thrilled to be invited to join Mirrin on a day-trip to Edinburgh, though she contained her excitement beneath a mask of indifference. As the train rattled through green fields beyond the edges of the coal-producing belt, Mirrin broached the problem which had so troubled Kate.

"That's a very pretty dress you're wearin', Betsy."

"Thank you, Mirrin. It's no nicer than yours, though."

"Was it expensive?"

"I daresay it was."

Winter sunlight, streaming through the compartment window, made Betsy's hair shine like spun gold. She was, Mirrin acknowledged, ravishingly beautiful, modish without being vulgar and with an assurance that even Drew could not better.

"Who bought it for you?" Mirrin asked.

"An admirer."

"Who?"

"That I won't say."

"Somebody in the shop?"

"Is it likely, Mirrin, that somebody in the shop could afford a dress like this. No, a gentleman of my acquaintance bought it for me."

"Kate saw you in Glasgow one night."

Betsy did not bat an eyelid. "Did she now?"

"You worry her, Betsy."

"Kate's a born worrier. Besides it won't be for long."

"D'you mean that your man friend intends to marry you?"

"Don't be daft, Mirrin. You're a woman of the world, ain't you? He's married already."

"I see," Mirrin said. "I suppose I should warn you against men like that. But there doesn't seem much point."

"It's over in any case," Betsy said. "Amicably over. Kate won't spot me in Glasgow any more."

"How long did it last?"

"Long enough."

"Betsy, did you . . . ?"

"Of course. That's what it was all about."

"It's wrong, you know, promiscuously wrong."

"It's not wrong, Mirrin. There was nothin' wicked about it. Besides, I thought it was time to look out for myself. Nobody else ever does."

"Kate an' Mam . . ."

Betsy laughed. "I'm not the baby in the house, in case you'd failed to notice. They've no time for anythin' except Neill."

"Havin' an adulterous affair was dangerous, Betsy."

The younger woman shrugged. "No more dangerous than many of the things you've done."

"I can't deny it," Mirrin conceded. "I assume you've a plan for the future?"

"Edinburgh," Betsy said. "To be honest, if you hadn't asked me along on this outing, I'd have gone myself very shortly."

"With what?"

"I have a little bit of money saved, and some decent clothes."

"Where? Not at home?"

"The money's in a bank, and the clothes I keep in a friend's house in Hamilton."

"God!" Mirrin said. "Kate would have a fit if she knew what you'd been up to."

"Kate need never know. I think you and I understand each other now." Betsy regarded the passing landscape for a moment. "How many men have you slept with, Mirrin?"

"Only one. The difference is that I . . . I loved him."

"Yet you took from him, didn't you? From Lamont?"

"Not for myself: nothing for myself."

"An' that makes it all right?"

Mirrin hesitated. "No, I don't suppose it does."

"I can't understand what you ever saw in Houston Lamont."

"I told you, I loved him."

"Aye, that's always the excuse, ain't it?"

"He taught you a lot about cynicism, Betsy, this gentleman friend of yours."

"Not just him: others in Dalzells' too."

"What?"

"No, no, not like that," said Betsy quickly. "By example, that's all. I did what Drew does: I copied others."

Mirrin shook her head. "It seems you've grown up without any of us realisin' it, Betsy. What do you hope to find in Edinburgh? A husband?"

"Of course."

"You're just as calculatin' as your brother."

"But I won't make a fool of myself."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that from now on I intend to be very careful," Betsy answered. "For one thing, I'm *not* goin' to fall in love."

Mirrin sighed. "That's the big difference between us, Betsy."

"Hm?"

"I'm the kind that needs t'fall in love."

"Will you really marry this tinker?"

"If he'll have me."

"I just don't understand that."

"You probably never will."

"What d'you intend to do about me?"

"Not a blessed thing," said Mirrin. "From now on you're Drew's worry, not mine."

Drew Stalker could not imagine who the lady might be who wanted to see him. He had avoided the company of women since the outcome of his affair with Heather Campbell, and the words of the first-year sprat who brought the message sent a shudder of apprehension through him. Mercifully, on this occasion, he was crossing alone towards the gate that would take him to the library where, on Drew's instruction, Fraser McAlmond had incarcerated himself with a programme of study and from which, like a gaoler, Drew would release him now that the afternoon's voluntary lecture was over.

The summer had treated Drew uncommonly well. He had consolidated his position as a close friend of the McAlmond clan and had spent many weekends at Pearsehill. Under Daniel Horn's guidance, he had learned more about the under-workings of the practice of law than any idealistic student had a right to know. Havershaw had even paid him for jobbing that vacation, though the money was less important to Drew now. Fraser proved a generous friend indeed; Drew, however, was careful to trim his own cloth and impose no undue strain on McAlmond's hospitality. He ate well at Fraser's table, bought neat, plain-cut clothes from his winnings at backgammon and, all round, had created a comfortable unostentatious mode of living for himself — and for Fraser too. Centred on the library rather than the tavern, the students' activity bore fruit. It now seemed distinctly possible that Fraser would one day ascend to the Scottish bar. The Sprotts and Hector Mellish, too, had sobered in their second year, egged on, though they would never admit it, by the example of young Andrew Stalker.

For a moment, there in the quadrangle on that bright November afternoon, however, Drew's edifice of scholarly respectability rocked. To the sprat he said, "Is this a joke? I warn you . . ."

"No joke. The lady's really there. A corker she is, too. Knock your eye out, you lucky dog. She's waiting behind the chapel."

It was not until he was within a few yards of the elegantly dressed woman that Drew recognised his sister. His first reaction was one of admiration, bordering on awe. Apparently he wasn't the only Stalker who had risen in the world. The change Mirrin had wrought on herself was astonishing. Last time he saw her she was ungainly and shabby and unrefined, unmistakably a working-girl. Now — well, she was, as the sprat had said, a lady to the bone. Even her voice had changed. In her, fleetingly, he saw mirrored his own progress. He smiled expansively as he approached the rustic bench by the chapel wall. "Mirrin! What a surprise! I didn't know you were home? It's jolly decent of you to visit me."

"Hello, Drew," Mirrin said. She offered her hand. She was thinking how like his father Drew had become, the same breadth to the shoulders, the same dark intelligent eyes. But a coldness, an imperiousness that were all his own, gave him the appearance of a man already past the pleasant period of illusion which is the season of youth.

"You must let me give you dinner," he said.

"With your friends, Drew?"

"If you wish. Certainly they would enjoy meeting you."

"Perhaps they would not care to hear us talk of your bastard son."

The easy humour drained from Drew's face.

"Is that why you are here?"

"Partly," Mirrin said. "You didn't suppose it was because I craved your company."

"Let's walk, Mirrin," Drew said. "I'll show you round this fine building."

"If you like."

He guided her away from the populated parts of the university, out towards the arched gate beyond which lay the terraces, sheds and storehouses of the master of works. A walking path followed the low outer walls.

"Is there anything wrong at home?" Drew asked.

"No more than usual."

"The . . . the child? Is it thriving?"

"Considerate of you t'ask," said Mirrin. "Yes, the child's thriving. Don't you even know his name?"

With a surprised grunt, Drew admitted, "No, actually, I don't."

"Neill. Neill Campbell Stalker."

"Who picked it? Kate, I suppose."

"You disapprove?"

"It's nothing to me, to be perfectly frank."

"I'm glad we're bein' frank today, Drew."

"What is it — money?"

"For once, no, it's not money: not directly."

"What then?"

Tersely Mirrin told her brother of the situation in Blacklaw and, guardedly, of her intention to marry and become a farmer's wife.

"But what has this to do with me? Do you want my blessing, Mirrin? Do you want me to act as the man of the family and give you away?"

"I want you to renounce Lamont's patronage."

"I understand," Drew said, at once. "Square away one chap before you take on another."

"Be careful, Drew," Mirrin warned.

"Lamont's made no move to retract on his undertaking. Legally, I assure you, he is committed. The situation is in no way changed by your decision to marry this farmer fellow, nor by anything else."

"Not even by the fact that you fathered a child."

"I was under the impression that Kate . . ." Drew stammered just a little, flushed cheeks indicating anger at being involved in the timid fears and petty pride born in his womenfolks' minds. "Does Kate not care for him?"

"Well you know she cares for him. And, as you say, Lamont may be legally committed to sustaining your annual twenty pounds and the lease of . . ."

"Ah, the lease?" Drew said, relieved. "The *lease* is the problem."

"I want us out of Lamont's hands, Drew; finally and completely."

"Well, I can easily manage without his pittance now."

"Mam, Kate and your son — they can't. Like it or not, Drew, we're all in the same boat."

"I'd contest that, Mirrin. You, for example, are our highly privileged passenger. Your . . . friendship, shall we say, with Houston Lamont did that much for you."

Mirrin's face stiffened. "For all your brains, Drew, you've the instincts of a pit rat. Mam and Kate are no longer just my responsibility. It's your bairn they're looking after."

"I'd the feeling it would come to this," Drew said. "Exactly how can I help them?"

"*You* must tell *me*. You're the intelligent one in this family."

"You make it sound difficult, Mirrin," Drew said. "I can influence Lamont now, however. With Havershaw's assistance, I'm sure I could hold on to that lease, have it upheld."

"That is *not* what I want."

"So I gathered," Drew said. "I suppose I could borrow enough to rent them another house. But I'm reluctant to put myself in anyone's debt."

"Except ours?"

"Quite!" Drew said. "Very well, Mirrin. I'll do what I can to pay off your debt to Lamont. I'll find money. That *is* what all this pleading is about, is it not? Money — as usual?"

"It's about the welfare of *your* family."

"I require only one thing," Drew said.

"What?"

"Betsy."

"Aye," Mirrin said. "I thought as much."

"I'm sure she won't object."

"I know she won't," Mirrin said. "That's why I brought her with me."

"She's here, in Edinburgh?"

"Across the street in a teashop."

"I see you do mean business, Mirrin?" Drew said. "We've more in common, perhaps, than you realise."

"The same boat, that's all," Mirrin said. "And only for a little while."

"Come on," said Drew. "There's no sense in wasting time."

The evening of Betsy's first day in Edinburgh was an overture to her future in the capital. First, there was her meeting with Drew. The effect of her beauty upon her brother firmed her in the knowledge that he was no longer master over her destiny, though he might, if she so decided, become its instrument.

After a strangely unemotional greeting, she was whisked to Gow Havershaw's chambers and there introduced to the lawyer. Breathless with appreciation of the honour bestowed upon him by his apprentice, Havershaw immediately invited Andrew and his sisters to dine. Politely Drew refused the invitation. Instead, he carried his sisters off again, by cab this time, across the city to Morningside where Fraser McAlmond, nursing his irritation at being abandoned in the library, had returned home.

Fraser's pique vanished at once when he clapped eyes on Betsy Stalker. If Betsy was impressed with the house in which Drew lived she gave no sign of it.

Fortunately the sisters were quick-witted enough to pick up

Drew's hints that they must not perjure his present position by divulging the truth about his upbringing. Even Mirrin was sufficiently impressed by the tale that Drew had concocted out of bits and pieces of reality, to support his inventions and add a few embellishments of her own. It was as well, she thought, that Kate had never come here, had never met McAlmond. Poor Kate would have been like a fish out of water. She would never have condoned the fabrications that Drew had devised or the need for such hypocrisy.

They dined, the four of them, in a genteel restaurant in Allandar Lane. During the course of the dinner, Drew quickly set in motion the plan which would free his family from care and, more importantly, establish his own future more firmly in Scotland's capital city.

"And," said Drew, midway through the fish course, "do you think that you will like Edinburgh, Betsy?"

"It will do for the season," Betsy said.

"Have you found a place of residence to your liking?" Drew asked.

"That *is* a problem," Betsy said. "A young woman is not always welcome. Besides . . ."

Fraser who had been hanging on every word butted in. "A place to live?"

"Just for a time," said Betsy.

"My aunt . . ." Fraser began.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Drew said.

"But really, my aunt would be delighted. You've met Aunt Roberta, I believe."

"Have I?"

"At the mid-summer, in Pearsehill."

"Ah, yes, a most charming lady."

"She would be only too pleased to provide your sister with hospitality. What do you say, Miss Stalker?"

Mirrin answered for Betsy. "As Drew has perhaps indicated, Mr. McAlmond, our circumstances . . ."

Airily, Fraser dismissed that argument. "Pride, that's Andrew's failing too. Stubborn pride. You would favour my Aunt by giving her your companionship, Miss Stalker. She is a spinster lady, and the house *is* far too large for her."

"Where is the house?" Drew asked.

"In Queensferry," Fraser answered. "Please, Miss Stalker, at least allow me to make an introduction."

"Andrew?" said Betsy, ostensibly deferring to her brother's experience in the protocol of such arrangements.

"Now, Fraser, are you sure?" Drew said, with just the right degree of uncertainty.

"The sister of my best chum must be made as comfortable as possible. And my dear old aunt, whatever her foibles, keeps an excellent house."

Mirrin said, "It can do no harm, Betsy, to meet the lady. If she *is* looking for a companion, perhaps you may fill the bill."

"That's it," said Fraser. "When will you officially take up residence?"

"Soon," said Betsy.

"Before Christmas?" said Fraser.

"Probably."

"Then we must invite you to Pearsehill for the Yuletide. How marvellous!" Fraser enthused. "Lord, but the Sprotts and Hector will be pea-green with envy. If you would kindly consider me your friend, Miss Stalker, I would regard it as an honour."

"But I consider you my friend already, Mr. McAlmond. Drew has told me so much about you."

"By Christmas, then," Fraser said. "You will be one of us, Miss Stalker."

"In which case, I insist that you call me Elizabeth."

"Elizabeth." Fraser poured wine generously and lifted his glass, eyes shining with infatuation — as well they might, thought Mirrin. "A toast: to Miss Elizabeth Stalker."

Glasses clinked. Once more McAlmond poured, and toasted. "To Andrew. To Andrew and Elizabeth Stalker."

"No," said Drew, smiling modestly. "If we must impress the ladies with our convivial habits, Fraser, let's pick our graces with more care."

"What, then, young Stalker?"

Drew lifted his glass, and sighted carefully through the pale, dry wine. "To friendship," he said. "To friendships, past, present *and* future."

"Perfect!" Fraser McAlmond declared. "As usual, you've hit the nail on the head."

All four glasses touched.

Betsy lifted her eyes and studied Fraser McAlmond's handsome, moonstruck face. For an instant there was amazement, that childish rapture which Mirrin remembered as one of her sister's many seesaw moods. But then it was gone, replaced by a glint of pure speculation.

Whatever Drew planned for his sister's future, he would not find Betsy wanting.

Daniel Horn grinned wolfishly, and sank his teeth into the potato pie. Munching, he said, "Gone again so soon, have they?"

"It was only a flying visit," Drew replied.

"You're a devil, Drew."

Drew cut his pie into eight neat pieces and forked the first into his mouth. He sipped ale from the mug and said nothing. It was lunchtime in the city's taverns.

"When did they depart?" asked Horn.

"The last train last night."

"Young McAlmond accompanied you all the way to the station, I imagine."

"He did."

"Fell for her, did he?"

"Daniel! Must you be so blunt?"

"She really is a wee jewel, that sister of yours. Come to think of it, even the older one is something special."

"We Stalkers are just naturally handsome."

"The females are, at least. When is she comin' back?"

"Two weeks."

"Lookin' for a bed for her?" Daniel asked optimistically.

"She'll be staying with Fraser's aunt, if you must know."

"Lady Roberta?"

"That's the one."

"How long?"

"Throughout the winter," Drew said.

"I don't mean that: how long until the nuptials?"

Surprised, Drew looked up at his friend's vulpine countenance. "Nuptials?"

"You do intend t'marry her into the McAlmond family, don't you, lad?"

"Perhaps," said Drew, drily.

Horn's jaws ground to a standstill. He picked his teeth with his fingernail, head cocked. "You don't?"

"What good would that do *me*?" asked Drew.

"Fraser's brother-in-law," Horn said, conducting the crescendo with his knife. "Plenty of influence. Wealth. The McAlmonds always look after their own."

Popping another segment of pie into his mouth Drew said, "I'm tired of being looked after."

Brow wrinkled, Horn asked, "But what other way is there?" Abruptly, he slapped his forehead with the heel of his hand. "You don't mean . . . ?"

"Of course I do," Drew said. "I'm no lickspittle, Daniel. I will accomplish my objectives in my own way."

"What are your objectives?"

"A full partnership in Havershaw's."

"You mean, you'll encourage that lovely sister of yours to *wed* the old boy?"

"That," said Drew, "would be a dreadful waste."

"Aye, I couldn't agree more," said Daniel. "What then?"

"Betsy may break as many hearts as she chooses," said Drew, "provided that she warms old Havershaw's hopes enough to persuade him to take me into partnership with him. By that time, I'll have the McAlmond business in the palm of my hand."

"How long will this take?"

"Five years."

"Ouff!" said Daniel Horn. "You're even more cunning than I gave you credit for, Drew, m'boy."

"After that, Fraser's patience will be duly rewarded and Betsy will marry him."

"I thought I would wind up clerking for you," Daniel said.

"Once I have control," Drew said, "we'll have some profitable fun with old Havershaw's secrets; all legal and more or less above board."

"All this plottin' is based on the assumption that your sister's willin' to play along with your plan."

"Betsy," Drew said, "will do exactly as she's told."

Rosy cheeks glowing under a snug blue-wool cap Neill Stalker took stock of the world that Sunday afternoon with all the innocent wonder of a princeling. He was far too young yet to evaluate the passing scene, but his alert eyes were tickled by the colours of the leaves that littered the ruts above the Poulter's burn and by the ruddiness of sunlight on the school and stout kirk steeple. Besides, he was with his aunties, and, so instinct told him, quite safe and secure. His tummy was full and he was content, the very picture of happiness, quite unaware of the meaning of the words that were flung back and forth between the adults who carried his Moses basket.

Mirrin was saying, "All right. We're alone now, Kate, so suppose you tell me what's got into you. You've been like a bear with its ear in a poultice since last Thursday. Is it because Betsy's goin' t'Edinburgh?"

"I'm glad t'be rid of her, Mirrin."

"What is it then? You're actin' as if you were mad at me."

"I'm . . . I'm resentful, I suppose."

"Resentful?" Mirrin was surprised.

"You know where you're goin'. You always did."

"My travellin' days are over."

"Only because you've found somebody that loves you — or so you say: though, it's a damned funny suitor that never comes near, an' that we've never even met."

"Aye," Mirrin agreed. "It's not exactly a model Blacklaw courtship, but that's part of what Tom and I have in common. It's not the means but the end that counts with us."

"Have you . . . slept with him?"

"No."

Kate paused to tuck in the bottom of Neill's blanket and, smiling, to dab the baby's button nose with her forefinger. Neill giggled. The women walked slowly on along the field path, the basket swinging between them.

"There's no . . . no passion in my life, Mirrin," Kate said. "Never has been. How long should I wait for it?"

"God, how can you say there's no passion. Look at us, all of us. We're full of passion, us Stalkers."

"Aye, *you* are," said Kate, bitterly. "You're so sure of yourself that you'll drive the rest of us willy-nilly in your chosen direction."

"You think I'm bossy?"

"Bossy's not the word for it," said Kate. "I'm not even sure I trust you any more, Mirrin."

"Not trust me? Oh, Kate, how can you say that?"

"You got rid of Betsy. I wonder if you're tryin' t'get rid of Mam, Neill an' me in the same sort of way."

Mirrin controlled her anger. She said, "Betsy and Drew are far tougher than you are, Kate. Drew renounced us long since, an' Betsy openly despises us. Edinburgh's the proper place for them."

"You made a bargain with Drew, didn't you?"

"Not a bargain exactly," Mirrin said. "But I used him, I'll admit."

"Nobody uses Drew."

"He can employ Betsy's good looks the same way as he employed his own brains. Drew's never been an ordinary lad, Kate. You said yourself . . ."

"I said I wanted no more to do with him," Kate snapped.

"He won't show his face in Blacklaw again, I can promise you that."

"Maybe not," Kate said. "But you're gaining *your* freedom by puttin' Mam and I in Drew's debt."

"That's daft, Kate," Mirrin said. "Whatever he's done he's our own flesh an' blood and were entitled . . ."

"*I want nothin' from him.*"

"Would you rather be in Lamont's pocket for the rest of your life?"

"What *did* you arrange with Drew?"

"I asked him to look after himself, that's all."

"He's been doin' that for years."

"To renounce Houston's patronage."

"Aye, an' what else, Mirrin?"

"To find the money to secure you an' Mam an' *his* bairn a permanent home. It's high time you were out of the house here. It's got nothin' for us now but bad memories, Kate."

"How will Drew do it?"

Mirrin shrugged. "How do I know? I left the problem with him. But he'll find a solution, never fear. Lord, Kate, if you'd only seen the way he lives, hob-nobbin' with the rich, easy an' familiar."

"I've seen the way he lives," Kate said. "I've seen a poor dead girl on a filthy mattress."

"You won't forgive him for that?"

"You weren't there."

Mirrin sighed. "No. But listen, Kate, we can use him."

"What are y'saying, Mirrin? We're not like him, even though we are his sisters. I don't believe in usin' people."

"I want you settled," Mirrin declared.

"So you'd even force Drew t'do it for you."

"I thought . . ."

"You're as selfish as he is," Kate said. "Mam was right."

"I want little enough for myself," said Mirrin.

"Only this man of yours, this mysterious tinker."

"Aye, an' why not?" Mirrin demanded. "Do you think I *had* to come back here?"

"I think you did," said Kate. "I think the old Mirrin and the Mirrin you've become were at war in you, an' that's the reason you came home."

"I've no patience with you, Kate; not in this mood you're in."

"I've precious little patience myself, Mirrin."

"Don't take it out on me because *you* got left on the shelf."

"Is that what you think?"

"I'm sorry, Kate. I spoke without . . ."

Stooping, Kate set the basket down, forcing Mirrin to do the same. For a moment Neill was bewildered then, his viewpoint on the fields changed, he concerned himself with inspecting the bleached weeds at the side of the path. Glancing round, Kate pointed at the village spread out behind them.

"D'you see it, Mirrin? Blacklaw: my village, my home. I have that, at least."

"Kate, I didn't mean . . ."

"Go your own way, Mirrin," Kate said. "Find what you want for yourself. I wish you luck. But leave us be now, Mam, Neill and me. We can look after ourselves."

"But the house isn't safe?"

"Was it ever safe?" Kate said. "We can live with that if we have to. No, Mirrin, leave us alone. We want nothin' from you now, an' nothin' from Drew."

"Are y'throwin' me out?" Mirrin asked, swallowing her tears.

"I'll never do that. You'll always be welcome in our house, but it will be *our* house, not yours, not Drew's."

"I only meant . . ." Mirrin was at a loss for words.

For a strange silent moment there was between the sisters a new respect; then Kate bent and drew Neill from the basket, swaddling him expertly in the warm blanket and holding him against her breast, hand upon his back. The little boy swayed slightly then took balance and swivelled his head to peer across at Mirrin, frowning into the sunlight as if he too was an accuser.

"I'll carry him home," Kate said. "Bring the basket."

"Kate, please, don't let's fight."

Holding the baby against her body, Kate hesitated. Behind her the sun skimmed off the grimness of the pit and tinted the long drab rows to the colour of leaves that would one day brown and wither and feed back into the earth.

"Tell Houston Lamont," Kate said, "that he can have his damned house back."

"But why, Kate? Why?"

"Like you I no longer want to be tied."

It was very early. Farmers were still in bed, dayshift colliers deep asleep. Only the winding towers creaked in the small hours' uncanny silences, telling that men were burrowing in smokey black stalls far underground, their lifelines guarded by a handful of troll-like shapes that flitted across the inner reaches of the pithead yard.

Yawning, Willie Kellock came downstairs and entered the rear of the bakery. Conscientiously, he attended to his oven before he attended himself. He unlatched the iron door with his elbow to expose the glowing mound of embers that remained from the previous evening's sponging. Feeding in kindling, he hooked out the ash-pans with quick fingers and slid them across the floor. On to the crackling sticks he dropped lumps of small coal as delicately as a duke measuring out sugar lumps, then, while that caught, he sawed at the flues to loosen soot and open the apertures. It was not until the firing had been completed, the pans emptied into a sack in the yard, and the glass gauges checked for the first slight temperature rise, that Willie entered the tiny kitchen to wash his hands, put on his clean apron and set the kettle for breakfast.

To his astonishment the chores were already done. Tea steamed in a tin mug, a bowl of porridge and a toasted ham roll were arranged on a tray on the drop-leaf table. The lamp was lit in its nook above the old brick hearth and Kate Stalker, neatly dressed in a brown serge skirt and Sunday best coat sat on a wooden chair in the corner.

"My, what a fright y'gave me, Kate," said Willie. "Still, it's grand t'see you first thing on a Monday morn. What is it, though? What brings you here at this unearthly hour? Is it trouble?"

"I hope not, Willie," Kate said. "Here, eat your breakfast. I'm not wantin' t'keep you back from the day's work."

Puzzled, Willie washed his hands at the sink, then, rather nervously, seated himself at the table and lifted his porridge spoon.

"Kate, what is it?" he pleaded, as the woman put down a jug of milk.

"I'm thinkin' this is the best time for the truth," Kate said. "It's hard t'be deceitful at this hour."

"Kate, what is all this?"

"Are y'still of a mind t'marry me, Willie?"

"You know I am."

"It'll mean sharin' your house with me."

"I want nothin' more, Kate."

"An' givin' room too t'my mother an' my nephew."

"I've great respect for your mother, Kate, an' I would be a good . . . well, father t'the wee chap. I think you know that."

Kate nodded. She leaned forward and kissed the baker on the brow.

"All right," she said. "I'm ready t'name the day."

"When?"

"The Saturday after Christmas."

"You're sure?"

"I'm certain."

"Right," Willie said. "I'll post the banns tomorrow."

Six

TO THE REVEREND Mitchell's gratification Blacklaw kirk was packed that Sunday morning, though the minister, a sheltered soul and not long come to the parish, did not understand the reason for the revival of interest in the word of God. Perhaps his elder, Mr. David Dunlop, who received banns of intended marriage, could have explained it; Davy had broadcast the news to the community in advance. Though other minor diversions coloured the precarious lives of the colliers, the Stalkers' affairs continued to intrigue all and sundry and, enlarged by malice, humour and imagination, the family's fortunes furnished a constant source of [redacted].

Though Flora Stalker could be encountered any day of the week, seated on her carter's bench, defended from casual approach by the big, untrustworthy horse, and Kate still worked her shifts at the troughs, Mirrin and Betsy were seldom seen in the village. The chance of a sighting of the two fashionable misses could not be ignored.

Mirrin and Betsy entered the church and walked together to the vacant pew close to the pulpit, a pew left unoccupied by the unspoken collusion of the congregation. The younger daughters were followed by Kate and Flora. Willie Kellock brought up the rear: a dirty old devil, some thought, who had wheedled himself into Mam's good books just to find a young wife for his bed. Not many miners held that ungenerous opinion, however: enough honest men and women were left in Blacklaw, in spite of Thrush's pernicious influences, to wish Kate happiness and to think to themselves that the girl was fortunate to have found a chap with a bit of siller tucked away and a tidy wee business to support her, even if he was old enough to be her father. Soon there would be no more troughs for Kate Stalker, no more grim winter days howking coal: she was lucky indeed.

Callum Ewing deigned to enter a church again, out of sentiment more than curiosity. Even Rob and his young wife, Eileen, had come together to attend. Rob seemed haggard and awkward in a serge suit and rimmed collar, his coarse fair hair slicked down with macassar oil. He looked like the one who was ailing, not Eileen. She was soft and pretty and gentle. It was difficult to credit that she had an illness at all.

Maggie Williams and other old school chums of Mirrin had dragged themselves from their beds or from the sticky demands of their bairns to trail along to the chilly kirk that Sunday, not only to hear with their own ears that Kate had netted the baker but to see what Mirrin and Betsy were wearing and in the faint fond hope that, at that public gathering, there would be some sort of telltale sign to substantiate the rumour that Mirrin was the mother of the Stalkers' bastard child and Houston Lamont the father.

If Willie Kellock was aware of the true sources of community interest in the formal announcement of his betrothal he gave no sign. He sat contentedly by his intended's side, dapper, smiling faintly, showing no hint of nervousness. Already he was planning how he would refurbish the house, how he would employ Mirrin — whom he liked — to help with the painting and cleaning that would be needed to make the bachelor rooms fit for Kate, Flora and Neill to live in. To his credit he did not now view his commitment with any sense of lost freedom. He had, he now realised, denied himself strength of feeling towards Kate in the expectation of rebuff. But now that she had named the day his love had blossomed, and he was impatient to enter again into domestic bliss. The house, even the bakery, seemed empty. His marriage to Kate would end his loneliness for ever.

Marriage was on the mind of several other gentlemen in the congregation, too. By chance, the Reverend Mitchell had chosen the Marriage at Canaan as his text, innocently abetting the irony of the apposition which put the Stalkers in one row and the coalmaster and his entourage adjacent to them, both households in full view of the miners' wives who craned and whispered and still hoped for a miracle of revelation or, at worst, a bit of a confrontation.

It was not to be though. The service passed without a stir, the usual ritual broken only by the reading of the banns and a murmur of sympathetic approval as Kate and Willie turned, involuntarily, and glanced at each other during the declaration.

For all that nothing much happened, Blacklaw's womenfolk considered church attendance well worth the effort.

By their clothes and bearing Mirrin and Betsy clearly defined the rise in the family fortunes, and there was, some claimed, that fleeting second when Edith and Mirrin, emerging from their seats after the Benediction, had met each other's eye, and, so it was said, looked daggers.

And there was the way Lamont himself looked, like a sick pony, head down and eyes staring, while Thrush courteously escorted both women, his sister and Lamont's wife, to the waiting carriage. But it wasn't much, really, and next day, before daylight, the old woman and her horse were out and about selling hot rolls and mutton pies, and Kate, in her dowdies, was back again shoulder to shoulder with her colourless workmates at the troughs, target for naughty remarks and recipient of good wishes, taking it all as any spinster might do, in good enough part.

The Stalkers' private confrontations were very private now, though any wife in Blacklaw would have given a year off her life to have eavesdropped at the meeting of Mirrin and Houston Lamont which took place that same Sunday evening in the mansion among the leafless oaks.

At that hour, she was their equal in every way. It was apparent in her manner, in the confidence with which she addressed Anna Thrush who, startled out of her implacability, kept Mirrin waiting upon the mansion's front step while a maid scuttled off to fetch the mistress.

"I did not ask for Mrs. Lamont," Mirrin said. "Is the coalmaster not at home?"

"Mrs. Lamont always receives our guests, even uninvited ones," Anna Thrush retorted.

"And her housekeeper keeps them waiting outside in the cold, I see."

"I have no instructions about the likes of you."

"And no proper manners, it seems," Mirrin said. "I'm not here to steal the plate, you know."

"Why are you here, if one may ask?"

"One may not ask," said Mirrin. "My business is with Houston Lamont, not his domestic employees."

"You were an employee here yourself once, were you not?"

"Aye, an' better at it than you are, I think," Mirrin said.

Anna Thrush's retort was stayed by a disturbance in the depths of the hall. Through the half-open doorway, Mirrin glimpsed a huddled discussion between Edith Lamont and a stranger — Sydney Thrush, she assumed — in the nook under the staircase. Obviously the pair had come from the back parlour, that large, musty room with its tuneless polished slab of a pianoforte flanked by two gilded music stands like embalmed dragonflies; never a note had Mirrin heard struck to dispel the room's pretensions of cultural refinement.

Thrush was more handsome than she had imagined; the regularity of his features did not make him personable or attractive however. At the instant of sighting, his hand was on Edith's forearm, his head lifted alertly as if he had developed the habit of peeking in four directions at once and, even in moments of intimacy and agitation, he could not focus directly on his companion.

Edith Lamont's distress was palpable. The mantel of authority had slipped like a cloak from her shoulders and, briefly, she was exposed as unsure of herself, even in the sanctuary of her home. How embattled did she really feel, that small aggressive woman who, oddly, bore a slight resemblance to the Queen herself, the Hanoverian nose more prominent now that cheeks had fattened and the chin thickened into the throat?

Anna Thrush stepped back as her brother advanced, an expression of polite enquiry, perfectly suited to the occasion, engraved upon his long face. Edith hovered in the middle reaches of the hall, hands clasped, her expression one of injured propriety.

"Ah, Miss . . . ?" Thrush appeared to search for the name.

"Stalker."

"Of course," Thrush said. "If you're here in search of employment may I suggest that you call again, at the kitchen entrance, tomorrow, when my sister, Miss Thrush, will . . ."

"I take it, sir, that you are Mr. Thrush?" Mirrin interrupted.

"I am: manager of Blacklaw pit."

"As I've already informed your sister," Mirrin said, "I wish to speak personally with Mr. Lamont."

"Mr. Lamont has retired for the night."

"Has he now?" said Mirrin. "That's most unfortunate."

"Perhaps I may be of assistance?"

"I doubt it, Mr. Thrush."

"Deliver a . . . a message?" Thrush too was nervous, caught off balance, perhaps by the young woman's confidence.

"You may tell Mr. Lamont I called," Mirrin said.

"By all means, Miss Stalker," said Thrush. "May I give him an inkling of what business you wish to discuss?"

"Property," said Mirrin.

"Property?" Intrigued now, Thrush was reluctant to dismiss her.

From the safe island of an Indian carpet in the middle of the hall, Edith Lamont called out, "Which property, Miss Stalker?"

"Mr. Lamont's property," Mirrin replied, loudly. "However, if Mr. Lamont has retired . . ."

"Ask Miss Stalker to join us in the drawing room for a glass of wine," Edith said.

"Will you join us, Miss Stalker?" Thrush asked.

"Under the circumstances, I must decline," said Mirrin.

"Perhaps, then, you will allow me to accompany you to the gate?" Thrush stepped quickly across the threshold, buttoning his jacket against the cold whirling wind that clashed the brittle stalks of the ivy plants by the entrance. Without waiting for her answer, the manager closed the mansion's front door.

Pools of light from the porch lamps diminished on the gravel. The curve of the lawn was swallowed up by darkness. Thrush paused at the foot of the steps, studying her. Mirrin caught the smell of wine on his breath, sweet, like his tone.

"I fear, Miss Stalker, that you may not understand quite how drastically the situation has altered during the time you've been away."

"Oh, an' what situation is that, Mr. Thrush?"

"I feel I may speak plainly," Thrush said. "You have the reputation of being a forthright young woman."

"I've changed, too, Mr. Thrush."

Thrush nodded. "But you still care about Blacklaw?"

"Yes."

"We have that in common, as I'd hoped."

"Don't make Blacklaw an excuse for plain speakin', Mr. Thrush," Mirrin said. "I'm not one of your colliers now, but I've eighteen years of experience built into me an' I know your sort too well to be soothed by a few nice phrases. What is it? Why won't you let me talk to Houston?"

"He's not responsible."

"That's not what I heard."

"Do not misunderstand me, Miss Stalker; in all outward appearances Mr. Lamont is *almost* his old self again. But I know differently. He suffers — as his sister suffered."

"I don't believe you, Mr. Thrush."

"He spent the summer with you, did he not?" Thrush put in bluntly. "You lived as man and wife, shall we say, in Beale."

"Houston told *you*?"

"No."

"You spied on him, on us?"

"How I came by the information is immaterial," Thrush said. "My concern is with the administration of Blacklaw colliery. I carry a major responsibility now. I must be told why you came here tonight, and what business you have with the coalmaster."

"Why?"

"I may be able to help you."

"In what way?"

"If you wish to . . . to go off, shall we say, with Mr. Lamont, a friend, an intermediary, would surely be an asset in making the way easier."

"What will you gain?" Mirrin said.

"Personally," Thrush answered, "I will gain nothing. But Mrs. Lamont, for whom I have the greatest respect, will be happier freed from the burden."

"Losing her husband to . . . to another woman will make her happy?" said Mirrin. "That's a strange statement, Mr. Thrush."

"She lost him years ago," Thrush said. "Now she may even lose the pit too; her share of its profits."

"So I'm to be the whipping-boy," Mirrin said. "I'm to persuade Houston to give up everything . . ."

"It would take little enough persuasion," Thrush assured her.

"It's what he wants. You've quite bewitched him, you know."

"No," Mirrin said. "I only filled a hollow in his life, and that's over now."

"Even after this summer?"

"I'll have no part of this . . . this deal of yours, Thrush. I'm sick to death of deals and bargains, and all the self-seeking that goes with them. I didn't return to Blacklaw for Houston. I'm here to tell him so, that's all. Even colliers' lassies have some sort of honour."

"Honour!" Thrush exclaimed. "What can you know of that? You lured the coalmaster into adultery, and yet you talk of honour. What did you gain? You gained money, favour, did you not? Very well, ask me for a favour."

"I ask you only for the favour of the truth," said Mirrin. "You must tell me why you want the coalmaster disgraced?"

Thrush snorted. "Are you a simpleton, girl? I want control of Blacklaw colliery. With Lamont out of the way I can have it."

"Blacklaw is all Houston has left," Mirrin said.

"He has you."

"Nobody 'has' me."

"Think of your family," Thrush said. "I can make life very comfortable for them."

"We can manage without that sort of help," said Mirrin.

"I can also contrive to make it very uncomfortable."

Mirrin said, "No, Mr. Sydney Thrush. You've no power over us any longer. You've lost your hold on this particular collier's family."

"I can ascertain that your brother loses his place at university, that your sister is sacked from her job, that your mother and sisters are tossed into the gutter, homeless."

"Too late, Mr. Thrush," Mirrin said. "We are free of you an' your kind. We've escaped. All of us."

"You will never escape," Thrush said. "Come now, you're a woman of the world. Tell me what you want."

Disgust welling within her like a sickness Mirrin swung away. Thrush caught her by the arm.

Suddenly, Houston was there, stepping from the shadow of the porch, where he had been all along. His waistcoat was open and his shirt sleeves unbuttoned at the cuffs. His leather slippers made no sound at all upon the verge as he came, in a dozen rapid strides, to Mirrin's aid. Thrush had no opportunity to block the blow. Lamont's knuckles struck him full on the mouth, drawing blood. The manager fell to one knee, only to be hauled bodily to his feet and struck once more in the face.

Holding the sagging figure by the bunched lapels of his jacket, Houston said softly, "You will be out of my house by morning, Thrush: out of the village: you and your sister and all your bags and baggage."

Thrush gathered blood into his mouth and, jerking his head, spat on to the gravel. "How dare you, coalmaster."

"By morning."

"Mrs. Lamont may have something to say about that."

"Mrs. Lamont does not own Blacklaw," Lamont snarled. "*I do.*" He flung Thrush from him, sending the man sprawling on to the grass.

Thrush was on his feet at once. "I can ruin you, coalmaster," he hissed. "I can bring you down."

"No, Thrush," Lamont said. "You can only ruin my reputation, and that's worth nothing now. *Get out of my sight.*"

Still bleeding, Thrush limped towards the mansion and rang the bell. The door was opened by Edith. She was almost knocked aside as Sydney Thrush pushed past her and, in spite of her protests, slammed the door behind him.

Afterwards, Mirrin thought how strange it was that it should end there, in the pool of light cast by the ornate lamps, surrounded by a raw December darkness. She could sense the landscape around her, the direction of the town, cluttered and cramped, spooling out from the workings, and the river running black between its black banks, and the high clean moorland behind the house. The mansion seemed to soar out of it all, not solid, flat as cardboard, a creation needing passion to give it substance. Only Houston and she had solidity, like actors upon a patchwork stage in some provincial hall where the fantastic was made credible only by traditions, conventions, and pleasant deceits.

Houston said, "I thought that you had come back for me, Mirrin."

"No, I came to tell you that it is truly over."

"I heard your voice, and I . . . I hoped."

"I'm sorry that you should have to find out as an eavesdropper," Mirrin said. "I take it that you were in the study."

"I came out by the window," Houston said. "It's a farce, Mirrin, isn't it? It doesn't even have the trappings of tragedy, now."

"What will you do about Thrush?"

"Be rid of him."

"And Blacklaw?"

"That is mine: that, at least, will always be mine."

"Houston, I am engaged to be married. I will wed my man at Candlemas, or shortly after. I thought it right that I should tell you myself."

"Yes."

Houston's face was haunted by defeat, and yet there was a dignity to it now, a disquieting nobility like that of an emperor who has cast off at last the shackle of scruples.

"Is there nothing I can do, nothing I can say to keep you, Mirrin?"

"Nothing."

"Then it is really, finally over between us?"

"It ended in Beale, last summer, Houston."

"Who is he, this man you'll marry?"

"He's nothin' special," Mirrin said. "He's just a man who wants his life to be his own — like me. I've had enough of giving and taking, Houston. I want to *share* now, share joy and sorrow, happiness and grief."

"You know, Mirrin, that I will fight it."

"Don't," the young woman said. "Please, Houston, don't."

"Your brother, and the house: have you thought of them?"

"I'd hoped you wouldn't force me to say it, Houston," Mirrin told him. "But we have no need of you now."

"What you told Thrush," Houston murmured, "is that true of me, also. Must I own you to have you? Is there no other way?"

"None," Mirrin answered.

"But you did love me once?"

"Yes, Houston, I loved you once."

He nodded. "I will remember that. I will remember, and wonder why I could not hold the things I treasured most. It seems that my life must be filled with second best, Mirrin. I can only thank God that in twenty years, or thirty, it will be over, the struggle ended."

"Houston, I wish . . ."

He took her by the shoulders, and brought his mouth to hers. Though his grip was strong and passionate, the touch of his lips was tender not forceful.

"I wish, too," he murmured, then turned from her, moving away while Mirrin stood helplessly at the mouth of the avenue that led down through the arched trees to the gate.

Houston hesitated, glancing back over his shoulder, his left arm raised in an incomplete gesture of farewell. "I wish that Thrush was wrong."

The coalmaster entered his house again and, after a moment, a maid appeared to extinguish the porch lamps, leaving Mirrin alone in the darkness to pick her way home as best she could.

The letter, the last direct communication they were to receive from Drew, came addressed to Mirrin. It contained a banker's order for the sum of fifty pounds. The implications behind the gift were obvious. The letter itself was curt, stating only that Lady Roberta Oakley had accepted her nephew's recommendation and would welcome Miss Stalker as a companion for the season. There was no question, of course, of Betsy being paid for the few duties that she would be expected to perform. Board, lodging and the facilities of the house would be recompense enough. It did not occur to Drew — or to Betsy either, for that matter — that there was anything unusual in a girl from a mining village, the daughter of a dirty, coal-howkin' collier, being given such a post in the centre of Edinburgh's haughty circle.

Drew did not enquire after his mother, his sisters or his son.

Kate took it upon herself to pen an answer, an equally brief letter to accompany the banker's order on its return to the sender. She gave no reason as to why she rejected the gift. Drew would understand. If he did not, then Betsy would have leisure to explain soon enough. Betsy would not leave Blacklaw in search of herself. Unlike Mirrin, she had long ago fixed on her objective. Departure for the capital, for Lady Roberta's house and ingress into the McAlmond set were undertaken as if they were quite natural progressions. Skinned of the girl's possessions, the narrow house seemed even more empty than before, haunted by memories stirred up by imminent change and the Christmas season.

It would be a lean time again for most miners' families. But not for the Stalkers. They, it appeared, had finally escaped the grip of poverty, not by chance or mere good fortune but by design. There were those in Blacklaw who despised them, others who were envious, and a handful, Rob Ewing among them, who saw in the Stalkers the rewards of courage and foresight and who could not, no matter how they tried, condemn them for it.

Mam and Kate bid Betsy goodbye at breakfast. There was little room for sentiment among the teacups and porridge pots and the scamper to make Neill ready for the day. Even Mam's kisses and tears were almost perfunctory as she tucked Neill into his basket. Flora too had her own life to lead and Betsy was no longer a part of it.

It was left to Mirrin to escort Betsy to Hamilton station where a number of boxes and a small trunk waited to swell the quantity of hand luggage that Betsy had brought from the house.

To Mirrin's surprise a contingent of Dalzells' staff had stolen time off to bid farewell to young Miss Stalker. Mr. Gabriel Reeves was there, and even the doorman, the old sergeant, had nipped away from his post to wish the pretty young miss 'all the best' in the campaigns ahead of her. Mr. Sutton had despatched a letter of reference, via Mr. Gabriel, and there was also a 'character' signed by no less a personage than Mr. Anstruther Dalzell. It was certain that Betsy had not wasted her apprentice years and would never want for a job.

Mr. Gabriel Reeves was also the bearer of a gift, a tiny box wrapped in hollyberry paper which, when opened, revealed a filigree silver locket which Betsy had often admired in Dalzells' show-case. Though empty of any sentimental geegaw, the locket was accompanied by an engraved card which identified the sender as Mr. Randolph Newton. Betsy's quick, wistful grin as she tucked the card hastily into her reticule told Mirrin that, whatever her failings, Betsy was not quite as ruthless as her twin and gave in good measure for what she received.

Shortly, Dalzells' staff returned to the emporium, tactfully allowing the sisters a few moments alone before the train left. If Betsy was in any way apprehensive about her future in Edinburgh and her employment by Lady Roberta she gave no sign. She only wanted to be off, to be there, to plunge into the adventures that awaited her and tackle the tricky problems of 'fitting in' as they [redacted]

Mirrin said, "I've nothin' for you, Betsy."

"I'm not a great believer in trinkets."

"But you like that locket?"

"Ah, yes. But I know how much that cost."

"Will you write to Mam, Betsy?"

"Of course."

Mirrin doubted it.

"And Kate's wedding, will you come home for that?"

"Not without Drew."

Mirrin shook her head. "I'd hoped you'd be our go-between."

"We're twins, remember. If Kate won't have Drew, then . . ." Betsy made a small apologetic gesture with her gloved hand.

"Best stay away then," Mirrin said. "It would only upset things if you brought Drew."

"Why do you hate him so much? Because of the baby?"

"God, no," Mirrin said. "That's the only thing he's ever given us, an' even that was hardly a gracious gift. I think Drew's the warnin' to all us Stalkers. Maybe we're all a bit afraid because he's our flesh and blood."

Betsy laughed. Even the laughter was controlled and careful now. "Tell me something, Mirrin; d'you really have a beau? I mean, is there really a romantic gypsy man just waiting to marry you?"

"Why should I lie about it?"

"To give yourself an excuse for getting out?"

"I don't want out, Betsy. I want in again. It's not for me the travellin' life, or the bright lights."

"I never really believed your tale," Betsy said. "You must be very sure of yourself, Mirrin, to set so much store by this rendezvous."

"I'm sure of Tom Armstrong," Mirrin said.

Betsy raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Well, if you ever need a dinner and a bed, I'm sure we can find a place for you in Edinburgh."

"Tom will provide what I need, Betsy."

The train chugged out of the siding and squealed to a halt at the platform. There was bustle among the handful of passengers and a deal of noise at the train's end where a Lanarkshire farmer was waiting to unload four bullocks from a cattle car. For an instant Betsy was forgotten, Mirrin lost in contemplation of the scene, engrossed in the realisation that soon she would be part of that hard, rustic life.

Even then, with Betsy's cynical warning still in her ears, it did not occur to her that Tom Armstrong would let her down. In two weeks, she too would be reaching out towards her goal, committing herself to a mode of living totally different to that which Betsy had chosen. The house, the hill, the herd, the pasture, those would be her limits. No matter how harsh, she could always console herself with the thought that at least she had fashioned the choice, and not been governed, as so many colliers were, by sheer necessity.

Betsy kissed Mirrin's cheek, and stepped into the carriage.

A minute later the train pulled out and, irrevocably, the sisters went their separate ways.

Seven

MANY YEARS HAD passed since Houston Lamont had betrayed any outward sign of vanity. Though always sober in appearance, he dressed to suit his rank and professional status, not to be a dandy to society ladies. That Christmas Eve, however, it seemed that he had gone out of his way to top his wife who, out of habit and boredom, had spent most of the afternoon preparing her finery.

When Edith emerged from her room and glided to the top of the stairs, she was amazed to see her husband waiting for her in the hall below; Houston resplendent in full evening wear, complete with a frilled shirt and black silk tie. Clean shaven, hair trimmed and groomed, he presented the aspect of a man about to attend an investiture rather than a provincial coalmaster treating his wife to dinner at home. The garments were all brand new, and expensively tailored. It could not simply have been whim or irrational impulse that had caused him to wear them. Obviously, he had planned it.

Immediately Edith suspected some sinister purpose, some additional burden that she must bear along with the twists and shifts of temperament that had plagued her for two years and which, now that Sydney and Anna had been expelled from the mansion, she was obliged to face up to alone, without confidence or aplomb. She descended the stairs slowly, only the rapid fluttering of her fan hinting that she was not at ease. The doors to the dining room stood open, the table within set for two. Without emotion, Edith took her husband's arm. He did not smile, but in every other procedure his manner was perfect, formal yet relaxed as it should be between husband and wife. Edith felt herself being escorted into the dining room, the door closed behind her, her arm again taken, her body conducted to the waiting chair. In the absence of a housekeeper, Houston drew out the chair for her, waited until she was comfortably settled, then walked down the length of the table and took his own place.

Pure wax candles burned cleanly in silver candelabra, plates gleamed, an ice-bucket glistened frostily, bottles, decanters and wine-glasses glittered; the tablecloth was snow white. Beyond the island of light, though, the gloom of the house made itself felt in the old, oppressive furniture. Even the bright fire was cowed by the heavy over-mantel.

Edith lifted a handbell from the tray by her right hand. She was anxious for the servants' fussing. It would be a relief to have even that sort of company to lessen the tension. She could not describe her emotion, would not admit that it was fear.

Houston said, "Please wait a little, my dear. I wish to speak with you."

How long since he had used an endearment? She thought she detected sarcasm in it, but that was not her husband's style.

"The dinner will spoil," she said mildly.

"I have given instructions that dinner be served at eight fifteen."

"Oh!"

"Tomorrow is Christmas, Edith."

"The fact had not escaped me, Houston."

"I have a gift for you; several gifts, in effect."

Edith's heart-beat increased. She was deathly afraid now. This was the height of lunacy, more disturbing, more dangerous than any drunken mood, any outburst of violent anger. She had never, ever quailed before his authority as she did that night. Gifts? What did he mean by gifts? In the ten days since Sydney and Anna had been sent packing, after the Stalker girl's appearance at the house, Houston had hardly spoken two words directly to her. Now he was using endearments and offering gifts with a graciousness that, in other circumstances, would have been quite touching.

Numbly Edith stared at her husband.

He slid his hand into his inner pocket and removed a sheaf of official documents, fanning them between his fingers like the oversized cards elderly ladies used to play cribbage with.

"These are my gifts, Edith."

"P . . . papers, Houston?"

"First, notice of eviction served on the Stalkers, effective from January first."

"But . . ."

"Yes, the eldest daughter will be married then, and they have already given notice of intention to vacate. This document, however, will ensure that there is no wavering on their part."

"Or on yours?"

"As you say," Houston acknowledged. He touched the second document with his forefinger. "This is a letter from Gow Havershaw. In it he informs me of his intention to article the Stalker boy at once, to take him into the business, in other words, and to meet expenses during the young man's final year. He frees me from my patronage."

"The impudence. We will take our trade elsewhere."

"Havershaw does little enough for us, in any case," Houston said. "But I agree: we will remove our business from his keeping and find another lawyer if and when we require representation in the capital."

"What makes you suppose that these items are of any interest to me?" Edith asked. "They are strange gifts, indeed, for Christmas."

"I wish you to have, in your possession, written testimony that I have . . . have done with that kind of charity."

"It would seem to me, Houston, that 'that kind of charity' has, rather, had done with you."

Tapping the third document, Houston went on unperturbed. "A letter; copy of a missive I sent today to your ally Sydney Thrush."

Edith stiffened. Surely, now the blow must fall.

"I have offered Mr. Thrush a new contract, a percentage share in profits, and a small plot of land on the lower part of the estate. He may build there, if he so wishes, or find another residence for himself and his sister. I wish to exploit his experience, but I do not wish to endure his company."

"And Anna?"

"No, Edith. I will not have either of them in the house."

"But . . . but, I don't understand this change in your attitude."

"I want profit from Blacklaw now, Edith: profit, and more profit.

If I can have nothing else in this life, I will at least enjoy the fruits of material success."

"How do you propose . . . ?"

"Thrush knows how it can be done. I will work with him, hand in glove with him. That's all that concerns me now. It's my intention to leave behind a model colliery, and a mansion worthy of the name of Lamont."

"Leave?"

"The fourth document, Edith — this one — is a deed of co-ownership."

Edith paled. "With whom do you intend to amalgamate? Who'll be your partner?"

"You will."

"Me? But . . ."

"I have transferred forty-five per cent of the stock into your name. You own it. You cannot, however, sell it in my lifetime, nor can you overthrow my wishes in respect of policy. The clauses are quite rigid on that score, my dear."

Tears welled into Edith Lamont's eyes. "Your partner. I never dreamed that you trusted me, Houston. Oh, my love, how can I repay your generosity."

"It will not be easy," Houston said. "You are my partner, now, and I demand high standards. You will help me make decisions, those decisions which affect the prosperity of the pit."

"And Blacklaw."

Her husband's face darkened; the deep, tragic lines bit into his flesh again, his eyes were haggard with hatred. It was not madness now, not even revenge. The coalmaster's inbred authority had steeled into an urge for total domination, a hunger for power in material forms.

"I care *nothing* for this town: *nothing*. It has done no more for my happiness than it has been paid to do, bullied into doing. I own Blacklaw, almost every stick and every stone of it. I will turn those stones, and every soul clinging to them, to *my* service."

"They were always your people, Houston."

"They were *not* my people. Never let me hear you say that again. They are nothing; serfs, that's all. You rule them, or you are ruled by them. Do you see?"

"Yes, Houston."

Lamont dropped all the documents save one to the cloth, spilling them neatly, like the hand of a new card game. Perhaps it was a game, too, Edith thought. If so, it was one that she could play with ease, supporting her partner, her strong and powerful partner as never before.

The coalmaster leaned across the table and, stretching, dropped the last remaining parchment close to her plate.

"What's this, Houston? What more can you give me?"

"My last will and testament," Houston Lamont said. "When I am dead, you may have it all to rule or ruin as you wish."

"Houston, please, no. Don't talk of such morbid things."

"Do we understand each other now, Edith?"

"Is it over, Houston?" Edith asked, looking down at the will, not daring to touch it. "Is all the quarrelling over?"

Lamont did not answer. He lifted the other papers and passed them to her, physically transferring all the sullied fragments of the past, tied now and neatly docketed for the future. But the letter on top had wafted open and exposed, by chance, the name *Stalker* printed in a bold inexpert hand.

And when Edith saw him stare, and how in his eyes there was no triumph and, at that instant, no resolution, she realised that her victory had been won at terrible cost.

She had gained a business partner and, forever, lost a husband. The last faint possibility of love had, that Christmas Eve, finally been snuffed out.

No snow fell on the Christmas season. Grey cold numbed the town throughout the week, locked the land under neutral cloud so that the clamour from the long sprawl of yards and railroad sheds rang hollow, out of nowhere, like voices remembered only in the head.

The celebrations which marked Kate Stalker's wedding were strangely restrained. Even her workmates did not know how to handle the occasion. The japes and send-off merriment which normally brightened a bride's last shift at the troughs did not materialise. A gift or two, small hand-made things, were given over at the dinner break and there was some half-hearted singing when Kate left the colliery gate that night. But on the whole Kate's marriage made Blacklaw folk uncomfortable.

Why was it that the Stalkers, between them, had achieved so much more than any other family in the town by turning the daydreams of their contemporaries into reality? Nobody could understand — not the nature of it, nor the cost. All that the colliers' wives could see was escape — escape from the anxiety of the trade, the tied house, the daily grind of making ends meet, dread of injury, fear of illness. The baker's premises with their newly whitewashed thick stone walls, and the small, tall house in the cul-de-sac smartened by Dalzells' best curtains and, so it was said, furnished like a palace, became a coveted haven of security and peace for many of the women and Kate Stalker the object of their envy. The wives understood what the hot young girls did not, that there was more to a man than the strength of his limbs and his ardour in bed. After a year or two, after the second or third bairn had been born, none of those 'intransient' virtues mattered very much. Maybe Willie Kellock was no spring chicken, but clearly he loved Kate Stalker and would lavish on her all the substitutes for vigour that an old man could provide.

Perhaps it was that love they envied most, a love quite safe from the demands of passion — and its pitfalls. It was unlikely that there would be bairns to distract the couple from each other. Besides, Mirrin Stalker had seen to that provision, in advance. Aye, they were nicely set up now, those Stalker women, with their future and the bastard bairn's future snug and secure. Betsy had always been apart from the community, being more than Blacklaw could handle or contain; Drew it had never understood and thus had feared; Mirrin it held in awe, for she had been where they would not dare to go, and had suffered not at all for her wilfulness; Flora was happy, with her hearth, her horse and her chatty contact with friends, casual and uncommitted, and a grandson to lavish love upon. And Kate, a spinster past her best, even she had managed to net a catch that, when all was said and done, was one of the best the town had to offer.

Aye, they were damned lucky, those Stalkers.

But the men, the colliers, colleagues of Alex Stalker, mates of his collier sons, they sensed the significance of the gossip in another manner, more diffuse, less personal. Even bawdy comments as to what the bride and groom would do that nuptial night to while away the hours covered a wistful sadness, a nebulous acknowledgment that times had changed, and that, in the close-walled community of Blacklaw, a whole era had at last dwindled to a close.

Where were they now, the hearty militants, the talkers, the planners, the dreamers? They were gone, or they were silent. Only the Stalkers had somehow wriggled from the crushing fist of circumstance and change. For the rest of them the grip had tightened to the point where poverty was not the principal enemy. Poverty at least had been familiar. What nagged the miners now was fear of their own selfishness and greed, qualities exposed by Thrush, utilised by Lamont, kept raw and vulnerable by a man's need to hold body and soul together in a lean world. So the past became the best time, a golden age; none of them had appreciated it before past became present, and the future was swallowed up in its despair.

Not many waited then at the kirk gate at four o'clock on that Saturday afternoon, two days before the year's end, to see Kate and her groom descend the steps as man and wife and troop across the top of Main Street to enter the cul-de-sac and the tall cramped house around which the satisfying aroma of bread perpetually clung.

The façade of the single lofted tenement was as white as flour now. Willie had hung holly over the lintel, mistletoe over the windows, and to announce his delight, had given away a tiny iced cake with each bag of rolls the previous day. The Stalkers were calm, even Kate, their happiness turned in upon themselves. If they were conscious of the thinness of the family ranks — with Drew and Betsy absent — they gave no sign of it. Flora held Neill, chattering, attentive, excited by it all. Mirrin wore her plainest gown and a sober hat, so as not to detract from the trim blue suit that Kate had chosen to be married in. No guests were invited to share the wedding supper, not even the Ewings.

When the door of the baker's house closed the spectators loitered aimlessly at the mouth of the little yard. They did not understand that the Stalkers, at last, had locked out the loss which had tainted their lives and almost brought them down.

Callum Ewing grunted.

"Well, that's that done," he said.

Rob nodded. "She looked bonnie, though, I'll give her that."

"Kate will make him happy," Callum said.

"Aye," Rob agreed. "Are y'for a pint then?"

"It's a gey thin weddin', though. Alex Stalker would . . ."

"Alex Stalker's long dead," Rob said. "An' a lot else besides, I'm thinkin'."

Father and son walked towards the welcoming door of the *Lantern*.

Rob said, "I wonder if it's true, about Mirrin?"

"The trouble is," Callum said, "that Mirrin Stalker usually lives up t'all the bloody rumours about her."

"Mirrin married t'a tinker." Rob shook his head. "What a pitiful waste."

"Unless she changes her mind."

Rob glanced furtively at his father. "Is that possible, d'you think?"

"I'd never wager money on what Mirrin'll do next," Callum said.

The younger man stopped. They were by the public house wall now, the weathered hoardings above them, the faint conspiritorial murmur of the bar beckoning them, as it beckoned most men, with its promise of companionship. Rob said, "I'm not sorry, Da."

Callum frowned, the sick, pinched flesh giving an anger to his expression, an emotion that was rare in him. If he had learned anything, he had learned stoicism; a dangerous philosophy, difficult to master, and, in the end, defeatist.

"Sorry about Mirrin, y'mean, son?"

"I was mad for her, y'know," Rob confessed. "I've never told anybody this before, but . . . but there have been times I've wished . . ."

"Don't say it," Callum advised gently. "Don't put it int'words, Rob."

"I feel so bloody guilty now."

"We've all wished for second chances at some time," Callum said. "A new job, a new wife, God, even a new pair o' lungs. But then, one day, without really bein' aware of it, the wishin's no longer a part of you. Instead, you're just thankful for what you've got."

"Last month," Rob said, "I would've called you a liar, Da, a bloody old hypocrite."

"But not now?"

"Not now," Rob admitted. "After all these months, I still love Eileen. It's the thought of losin' Eileen that made me want Mirrin; not . . . not . . . the other thing."

"Aye, lad, I taught y'politics, but I can't teach you everythin'," Callum reached up and patted his son's shoulder. "Not even your old man can tell whether it's a worse thing t'need than t'be needed. Come on, we'll away in an' have a crack with our kind and a jug o' best draught."

Rob got as far as the door.

"No, Da," he said. "I'll pass it by for tonight."

"Why? Where else d'you have t'go?"

"Home," Rob said, "t'my wife."

The wind came from the Lothian hills, bringing a taste of snow from the high pastures, and hardship for ewes in lamb and beasts on scant winter grazing. Nourished by an unimpeded passage over the moor, it howled down the funnel of the Sheenan's glen to clatter slates and snap tackle throughout Northrigg, Eastlagg and Blacklaw.

Some found the wind invigorating. Some, snuggled warm in quilts and blankets against the drafts, were stirred to fantasise on the towering waves that threatened mariners and other hardy rovers, and imagine themselves braving the elements in some God-forsaken spot elsewhere. Some listened with a pragmatic ear, predicting damage across Scotland, an aftermath of floods or snowdrifts, and bemoaning the probable loss of trade. Up in Lamont's colliery, the coalmaster toured with Thrush, a phalanx of foremen around him, bowing and scraping like liveried flunkies, fervently promising that no mishaps would delay the flow of coal from the guts of the earth to the marketplace, no matter how bad the weather. Second-hand assurances no longer satisfied the owner. He had to see the work done with his own eyes. Gaunt and sombre in a half-tile hat and lined cloak, his presence whipped on the jobbing parties around the yard throughout the shift that saddled midnight and the January dawn.

Hogmanay, and many of its traditional sentiments, were blown away by the gale, abetted by Lamont and his manager, Thrush. The goodfolk of Blacklaw mainly stayed indoors, nursing their memories and sweetening their greetings to 1876 with a dram by their own fireside. Those hardies who 'popped out' soon enough 'popped in' again, dishevelled and chittering cheeks reddened by the scathing wind, not by alcohol.

In her new home in the cul-de-sac, Kate Kellock helped her husband lug in hay for Wallace's supper. Fighting the bale with her back, she and Willie, like some strange beast, crabbed up the side of the stable and, laughing, burst in on the stallion in a whirl of dust and a great wing-like batting of all the tarps and blankets that were draped about. Gasping for breath, the couple collapsed upon the hay. Perhaps it was a comic sight, the wee baker man and his tall bride kissing across the straw like bucolic lovers in a Landseer painting. But Wallace, who had stamped all that evening, annoyed by a galloping force bigger than himself, was oddly calmed by the show of affection and, craning over the stall, dunted the baker in the back as if to egg him on.

It was fitting, Kate Stalker Kellock thought, for the Scottish climate to be so rough. It was the roughness of life she loved, those things that nobody would ever guess about her marriage pact, the doing, the labouring, the long day's toil with ovens, flour and trays, and her man, her own man now, proudly showing her what was what, upstairs and down, with a wry humour that she had not remarked in him before.

"What is this, Willie Kellock?" she asked. "You that pretended to be so proper. I'd never have guessed you were such a daft lad at heart."

Puffing, Willie leaned back, cradling Wallace's neck in his arm, his face against the horse's bristling cheek. "I'd never have guessed it m'self, Kate," he confessed. "I'd never have guessed at lots o' things, to tell the truth. I thought when . . . well, when my dear wife died that everythin' was over for me. But I came t'Blacklaw, made the change — an' I found you. One thing leads t'another, does it not, Kate?"

"Loiterin' here will lead t'rheumatics, if we're not quick." Rising briskly, she gave Willie her hand and pulled him to his feet. Her eyes searched his face and found no uncertainty there.

It was an honest match, more honest, perhaps, than she deserved. Tomorrow her honeymoon would be over. Tomorrow, very early, Willie would take the van and lug up the bits and pieces that were left in the narrow house at the bottom of the hill. He would collect Mam and the baby too, and they would come to this house which was her house now and which she would share with them, out of love not duty, as Willie Kellock shared it with her. All her bitterness had been left behind, lost somewhere, abandoned. She was her old self once more, with affection enough and to spare. Perhaps one day she might even learn to forgive her brother his heartlessness. But that day would be very far off, if it ever came at all.

Tomorrow they would be a family once more, Willie Kellock's family. He would look after them, as she would look after him.

And Mirrin? No animosity remained in Kate.

She hoped that Mirrin would find her man at the Hiring Fair and that he might turn out to be all that Willie was to her. If that was what her sister sought, then it was little enough to ask in recompense for all that she had been through and survived.

"Kate, what is it?" Willie asked, reaching once more for her hand. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," the woman said and, kissing him loudly on the mouth, broke the knot on the straw bale. "I'd forgotten, that's all."

"Forgotten?"

"What it's like to be happy. I thank you for that."

"Will y'say that when I'm a hundred, Kate?"

"Aye, Willie, I'll say it still."

Behind the couple, true to form at last, Wallace slammed his hoofs on the stable board to shake them out of sentiment and command his bit of supper.

The fire in the hearth burned low. Tonight it would be allowed to die and, before bed, the hearth would be smoored, nooks and crannies brushed clean, the iron blacked, the brass polished. In a day or two, when Thrush employed another miner — a 'mechanical' from Ottershaw or Carbis, like as not — and his family occupied the tithe, another woman would tend the life of the domestic flame and keep it constantly lit throughout the year. Flora had done her duty to that stranger. The narrow house shone like a new pin. Only the grate remained to be burnished now.

Flora Stalker sat in the deep chair that had once belonged to her husband. In her arms her grandson lay asleep, head upon her ample breast, one small fist slackly gripping the bib of her apron.

Teething made Neill unusually fractious. But he slept now, soothed by the warmth of his grandmother's body, the enfolding strength of her arms.

As she looked across the kitchen, Mirrin could not help but speculate what would become of that child, what he would make of himself. He was Drew's son. She would do well to remember that — they all would — as he grew to manhood in the baker's house. Would he be a comfort to them, or a trial? Time alone would tell.

Gauging her daughter's thoughts, Flora glanced up from contemplation of the embers, sucked and sustained now only by the strength of the wind at the chimneyhead.

"It's a right wild night," Flora said. "I hope it clears by tomorrow."

"For the flittin'?" said Mirrin.

"Och, we'll manage that come snow or shine," said Flora. "But maybe this man of yours won't come if the weather's not agreeable."

"Bad weather won't stop Tom Armstrong," Mirrin said.

"How long is it since you last saw him?"

"Only three months, Mam."

"Perhaps he went back to be a sailor again."

Mirrin smiled understandingly. "He made me a promise; he'll keep it."

Mam grunted. Such a lax arrangement was beyond her. With all the emotional upheavals of the past months, all the radical changes in her life, she could not really challenge this move of Mirrin's, or the depth of her daughter's trust in a man none of them had ever clapped an eye on. But Mirrin had never concerned her. Mirrin would always come out all right, no matter what adversities beset her. That was the nature of her middle daughter, as kindness and patience were Kate's virtues.

"It doesn't seem like a New Year night, Mam, does it?" Mirrin said. "Nobody comin' t'the door an' hardly a sound out there in the street."

"It's the way I prefer it," Flora said. "It suits me t'have the place t'myself."

"I'm still here," Mirrin gently reminded her.

"Perhaps that's as it should be," Flora said. "Your father always favoured you more than any of the rest of them."

"Da didn't have favourites," Mirrin said. "He loved us all equally."

Flora smiled. "No, Mirrin: it was you he favoured — though he was careful not t'show it over much. I wonder what he'd have said to you an' me bein' here alone, an' the house goin' back t'Lamont?"

Mirrin shrugged. "We'll still be Blacklaw folk, Mam."

"I will, an' Kate will. But the rest of you — you've gone out, an' I doubt if you'll be back much." Flora looked down at the child asleep in her arms. "The strangest thing of all, Mirrin, is that I don't really care."

"Mam, Mam!" Tears stole into Mirrin's eyes. "How can you say that?"

"I . . . I still care for you, all of you, even Drew. I'm not daft though; I know I can't hold you. Your father would have let you go. It was not his way t'hold anyone against their will. Aye, it's so different from what it used to be. Och, I think I've been too long here."

Mirrin kneeled on the worn stone before the grate, took her mother's hand and held it, searching the woman's aging features for signs of sorrow or despair. To her surprise she found none.

"I know what you're thinking," Flora said: "that I'm callous and unfeelin'. But that's not so. It's just that nothin' worse can happen t'me than happened on that March day. I have Kate an' Neill — an' Willie Kellock, too, in a way. That'll be enough. What I've left t'give, I'll give t'them."

"And me, Mam?"

Flora shook her head. "When I was young, Mirrin, I was more like you than you imagine. I had my dreams, too — though it's hard t'believe when y'look at me now. I dreamed of excitin' things, as you do. But I settled for less. I settled for love, Mirrin, because I wasn't brave enough t'search for independence."

"It takes courage t'settle for love, Mam," Mirrin said. "It's no second best; not in my book."

"That's what your father said."

"You have Neill, Kate, Willie — what about me? D'you not still have me?"

For a long moment the woman did not answer. The kitchen was filled with the strum of the wind and the long, plucking rattle of loose slates vibrating across the roof. Pale ash in the belly of the grate dissolved into a handful of dull red sparks and, trapped by the draft, lifted into the chimney's throat.

"The fire's out," Flora said. "It'll be cool enough t'smoor in half an hour."

"Please, Mam, won't you answer me?"

"I can't, Mirrin."

"I'm not desertin' you, Mam."

"Aye, you are — an' rightly," Flora said. "I lost you years ago. It's not this tinkerman, at all. If it wasn't him, it would be another. I don't mean you're flighty, Mirrin. But you need t'have somebody t'trust, t'give love to."

"I've found him."

"Maybe you have," Flora said. "I hope so for your sake."

Tears dried in Mirrin's eyes. She understood her mother better at that moment than ever before. Life was not over until it ended. There was courage in Flora Stalker, too, but it was not unmixed with doubt. Loving itself was fraught with doubts. But surely it was worth the candle, a rushlight for the dim years ahead.

Suddenly the narrow house was full of the gruff chat of her father and brothers, menfolk growing up, women growing older. All the devotion, the loyalty, the royal days of youth and innocence were experienced afresh in the bare bleak room. The heart was not a house that could be cleared of its passions. Mam was right. Mirrin's question had no definite answer. The living out of decisions was their only possible proving.

In the sound of the wind now Mirrin imagined that the restless past and the infinitely patient future were merging like two voices matched for pitch. Tomorrow she must trust a stranger, just one of all the strangers she had known.

Impulsively, she pushed away from her mother and, on her knees, shovelled out the ash from the grate. Rising, she took the shovel to the front door, hitched up the latch with her elbow and, stepping out, allowed the muscular wind to make the gesture for her. The last dregs of the last fire drew up and out like a flickering scarf to twist away into the strong night air.

Tomorrow, Mirrin thought, my future will begin again.

Comforted, she closed the door of the narrow house and returned indoors to make ready for bed.

Eight

SHORTLY AFTER NOON the wind dwindled and fell still and furrowed clouds thinned enough to coax Mirrin's gaze from the entries to the market square and lead it to the country road where she had walked with Tom Armstrong all those months ago. Ironically, her search had led her back to the starting place, to the township of Lanark, to discover the truth.

Anticipation made her impervious to the gloom of the day. Her excitement did not flag until the first outriggers of dusk massed in the eastern sky, their density stressed by a fingernail of sunlight momentarily visible deep in the cloudscape.

Worthies, dotting to and from the public house, had predicted that there would be rain before nightfall. But as nightfall approached and with it a nip of cold, they changed their tune and prophesied a touch of snow instead.

The benches at the base of the cornstores walls were deserted. Few farm servants had presented themselves for fee that New Year's Day. The handful of casual labourers who had turned out had crouched disconsolately under the eaves or stumped about, hunched in their hodden jackets, grumbling at the injustices of the last quarter which had forced them to contemplate change. Even the laird's factor, down on his mare to acquire a shepherd for the lambing, was damned uncivil, took nobody and soon rode off again to cost the damage that the gale had done to his master's broad estates.

Mirrin received no offer of employment, though another female, a half-daft dairymaid well-known in the district, was hired by a poor tenant who had lost his daughter to consumption and could not struggle on short-handed with spring on the horizon. The daftie would slave for her meal and a howff in the byre: her virtue was her price, no more, no less.

Throughout the latter part of the morning, Mirrin walked around the square, alert and restless, awaiting the appearance of her man, curious as to how he would present himself, what joke he would make of it. But when dinnertine was past and day waning, she seated herself by her bundle on the bench and no longer watched the avenues.

Only three or four men remained, too stoical or too tipsy to retreat before the knowledge that nobody wanted them and that they were stuck in the rut of an unwelcome hire, or worse, were out of keep for the quarter.

Then they were gone too, drifting off, not obviously dismayed, and the square belonged once more to Lanark's own goodfolk. The smell of cooking pervaded the damp air. Lamps in outlying cottages were lit. The carriage trade ebbed and flowed along the base of High Street around the *Black Bull*. Down there, away from the mart, there were splashes of colour, sounds of life. But Mirrin remained in the market square, numb, stunned by the result of her own unworldly naïvety.

Every love was the love of a stranger, and she realised now that she had put her faith in herself, more than in Tom. The drifter in him, however, had won out in the end, it seemed. He had gone on down other roads, aboard other ships, without her, his purpose proved no better than a fleeting conceit.

In lulls of sound from the main stem of the town, Mirrin could hear the river's clamour; the Clyde dropping down over Dundarff and the Mill dams, boiling through linns and smooth along straights, driving west towards the city and, eventually, the sea. The dream of the land and the life of the land was stilled in her. Yet, when she got stiffly to her feet, it was the quietness of the steadings that brought an ache to her heart, and the thought of the loss of a man who would live in a house of his own and till and pasture away from the lights and the sounds. But that dream too was over, the longing exloded like a mariner's flare, a dispersing brightness, lost.

The blunt clocktower in the Castlegate rang six. It was ten miles north to Blacklaw: not *her* home now, only a cold camp, a place of ashes.

Lifting her bundle, she swung it on to her back. Had Tom intended this? Was this his lesson to her, that she too could be wrong? A lesson learned well. What did he expect of her, trust carried into foolishness, or — nothing?

Mirrin hesitated. She had good warm skirts about her, strong boots that fitted fine. She even had money in her purse, tucked down into the waist. It was not the stuff of endings, rather of beginnings. Excitement rose in her again, smooth, polished and hard as brass. Damn the tink! She would not let him ease away again, not without a fight. Instinct told her that this too was part of his plot to force her to make a final decision. He wanted her free, really free, without lingering regrets.

The road to the north would lead only to Blacklaw.

Mirrin gripped her bundle tightly and headed across the square out of the town by the hilly south road towards the knowes, the way Tom had taken her when they had travelled together that very first day.

It was full dark. As the lights of Lanark dropped away behind, Mirrin was guided by a prickle of steading lamps set back among the hills. Her impulsive assurance wavered; her step slowed. She drove herself on once more, into the lonely January night.

He was not far from the town, not cruelly so. The box-cart was pulled in to the verge, the horse on a slack trace cropping the grass. A lantern on a pole stuck into the whip socket shed a pale golden light upon him. He sat on the plank, his arms on his knees and a pipe in his mouth, looking down at her as she came abreast of him.

"That's a heavy load, flower," he said, conversationally.

"Heavy enough."

"Too heavy t'carry far."

"Aye, a box-cart's a useful thing," Mirrin said.

He had covered the puffed-sleeve shirt with a heavy peajacket, a muffler knotted loose into the collar. The hat was the same floppy felt though, and the coins jingled as he stepped down.

"Have y'come far?" Mirrin asked.

"Ten miles, give or take a bit."

"So you're resident in these parts, then?"

"Aye, I'm a tenant farmer."

"Where?"

"At Hazelrig."

"But that's . . ." Mirrin began.

"It's best t'put a dairy near a town."

"Blacklaw," said Mirrin. "God, Hazelrig's only four miles from Blacklaw."

"So it is," Armstrong leaned against the shafts delicately drawing the big grey horse's tether, coaxing the animal to him. "Fine wee parcel of country, though, up on the back o'the ridge. You can neither see nor hear the grind o'the winding towers, no, nor even smell the smoke."

"Is there much t'be done on this steadin' of yours?" Mirrin enquired.

"Enough to keep a man an' a girl occupied for the rest o'their lives."

"Would a woman do, instead of a girl?"

"I'm not lookin' for a servant, y'understand."

"What are y'lookin' for, then, so far along the road at this hour?"

"A wife," Tom answered.

"Are y'fussy?"

"Not very."

"Will I do?"

He studied her thoughtfully, then nodded. "Aye, you'll do."

Mirrin tossed him the bundle which he hoisted into the cart. She climbed over the wheel to the plank bench and watched Tom back the horse and strap it into the shafts. With a skip, he was up by her side.

The box-cart lurched, throwing them together. His hand hugged her waist, pulling her close. His lips were warm, warmer than her own. She did not resist him, acknowledging the new dimension between them.

But when they had drawn apart for Tom to navigate the turn, Mirrin said, "Why did you make me wait, Tom?"

"To be certain."

"You nearly lost me."

"Never!"

"How could you be so sure of me?"

"I was always sure, Mirrin. But you weren't."

"I am now."

The cart wheels trundled on the crown of the road, pulling them north again. The lighted windows of the small hill farms seemed friendly, steadings like their own, all part of the rich, colourful fabric of Lanarkshire, with its smokey towns, market burghs and colliery villages.

Mirrin settled against him, her arm linked with his.

It was the evening of the very first day of January and her future had just begun. They rode on in silence for a while, until the streets of Lanark had been negotiated and there was only the dark land around them once more.

"Tell me, flower, can you still sing?"

"I can. Can you?"

"Better than ever," Tom Armstrong said.

"Start me off, then," Mirrin told him.

So the tinker sang, loudly, and, after a time, Mirrin joined in and they sang all the cheerful songs they knew on the journey home to Hazelrig farm.

Hearts of Gold

The poor labour under a natural stigma;
they are *naturally* despised.

William Hazlitt

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PART ONE

ONE

The Runaway Wife

The winter of 1814 was reluctant to give way to spring. In March its icy trademarks remained stamped upon the hills and the squalls that snaked across the river, broad as a lake below the Kincardine crossings, were of sleet not rain. Between flurries, however, the sky cleared to a huge, washed-blue sheet that stretched taut as gauze above the distant estuary and made the lands that penned the Forth seem hard and new and clean.

Elspeth Patterson no longer cared where she was. She had no notion where the cart would finally trundle to a halt, in which hamlet on which headland she would be obliged to spend the night, to find food and shelter for herself and her child. She knew only that she was travelling again, moving on again, riding further and further from the place that she had once called home.

She was worried about Mary Jean. During a night in the open the baby had caught a cold and mewed and snuffled fretfully in the shawl in Elspeth's arms. She was worried too about the cost of the ride for every mile that the cart travelled cost another penny from her purse. But she did not have the courage to call to the carrier to set her down. Each mile that rolled away took her further from Balnesmoor, from James Moodie, her husband, her father.

She had fled his house in the autumn, had foolishly supposed that, once settled in the city, she would be lost among its citizens and safe from pursuit. She had reckoned without James's ingenuity and perseverance. He had distributed handbills describing her, offering reward for news of her whereabouts, and there were plenty of sharp-eyed opportunists in the weaving trades, women and men who would sell their own mothers for a crown. Three times she had been recognised.

Three times she had been challenged and handled, and had escaped. In hindsight Elspeth realised that she had betrayed herself. She had refused to jettison all of her past. She had retained the name that her foster-mother, Gaddy Patterson, had given her, and that was a grave mistake. Everything that connected her with Balnesmoor and James Simpson Moodie should have been left behind in the ruins of her marriage. From the first she had compromised and the compromises, one by one, had brought her down.

The cart was a long four-wheeled affair drawn by a pair of burly Clevelands. Given rein the horses could have pulled it along at a tidy lick but its cargo was apparently too valuable to risk at speed. Ten large glass bottles, bedded in straw, gave off a stench of corrosive chemicals. Exactly what the bottles contained and where they were being taken were questions that Elspeth did not dare ask, for the carrier was a wet-mouthed, slovenly old man who would give her no answer but a snarl. However, she had been lucky with her other rides that day. Only this last slow cart would cost her precious pence since the others out from Stirling had been driven by cheerful, charitable men who had waived passenger charges for a pretty young woman with a bairn in [illegible]

All day long she had trundled along the hem of three shires. She had eaten nothing since dawn. Now her head swam and her muscles ached. She drowsed in the twilight and might have fallen asleep if it had not been for the clanking carboys and the baby's coughing. Jerked awake, Elspeth would peer at the broad-running river and gigantic sky, and wonder if she had at last passed out of James Moodie's reach.

"Whoa-whoah!"

Abruptly the horses came to a halt. The carboys lurched and gurgled menacingly.

Bolt upright, Elspeth clutched Mary Jean protectively to her breast.

"What is it?" she asked. "What's wrong?"

"Get down," the carrier growled.

"But – but where are we?"

"We've come as far as I'll tak' ye. Get down when you're told."

There was nothing to be seen but flat shore and, above the road, a bank of leafless trees.

Elspeth had no strength left to challenge the man. Meekly she hoisted Mary Jean into the crook of one arm. She reached for the oat sack, her bundle, which contained all her belongings. The carrier would have none of it. Perhaps he thought that she might skip into the trees and cheat him of payment. He craned over the board and tapped her wrist with his willow switch.

"Ye can have that after I've been paid."

Elspeth climbed over the side of the cart and, using the wheel as a ladder, clambered stiffly to the ground. She walked to the driver's step and fumbled in the waist of her skirt for the leather purse in which she kept her travelling money, three shillings and some coppers. Four one-guinea banknotes and two half-crowns, the last of her funds, were tucked into the toe of a shoe in the oat sack.

She untied the purse string with her teeth.

"How much do I owe you?"

"Fifteen pence," said the carrier.

"What? We haven't made fifteen miles."

"I say we have."

"No, it's eight at most."

"How would you know since you sleppit most o' the way? It's fifteen mile at a penny a mile. Pay me, damn you."

Elspeth bit her lip, shook a shilling and coppers from the purse into the palm of her hand, then tipped out the rest of the silver and showed it to the carrier.

"See, I can pay for more miles. Will you not take us on to a town?" she pleaded.

The carrier squinted from under bushy brows.

Elsepth had no warning as to his intention.

Suddenly he lashed her arm with the willow switch. Coins, the purse too, leapt from her grasp into the well of the cart. Elspeth cried out and darted forward. But the carrier cracked the reins and cried the horses into motion and Elspeth had to step back, swinging Mary Jean away, or she would have been crushed beneath the wheels.

The old man stood upright and slashed at the Clevelands. They surged forward and the cart was off and away, carboys clanking. Clasping the baby, Elspeth ran frantically after it.

"*Thief,*" she screamed. "*You thief. Stop, you thief.*"

The carrier no longer cared about the fragility of his cargo. The cart clashed on, dipping down the slope of a little hill out of Elspeth's sight.

She ran after it for thirty or forty yards, then realised that it was hopeless. She stood stock-still watching the cart appear briefly a quarter of a mile away then vanish around a turn in the road.

Rocking the wailing child against her body, Elspeth stumbled to the verge. She was numb with exhaustion and, trembling, seated herself on the grass, aghast at what had occurred. She had been abandoned in an unknown part of the country without so much as a penny to buy bread, and neither she nor Mary Jean would survive unscathed another night in the open.

She sat there for some time, crooning to and soothing Mary Jean until the baby quieted.

It was late now, almost dusk. The lavender sky had cooled to pale yellow. Long feathers of cloud, stained rust and rose, soared across the estuary. Rooks cawed in distant trees and a solitary gull flapped overhead, solid and unhurried against the night's first stars. The river no longer reflected the colours of the sky but ran heavy and cold as mercury.

If, at that moment, James had come riding out of the gloom Elspeth might have been tempted to surrender to him, to return to Balnesmoor and pretend to be 'his wife'. It would cost no more than the price of a lie, public acknowledgement that Mary Jean was his daughter. James knew that it could not be so, for he had never lain with her. He had married her not out of incestuous passion but only to possess her, to own her under law.

Elspeth stared into the gloom. How could she burden Mary Jean with her father's guilt? Did her father truly believe that he could wipe away his shame by compounding it, that, in course of time, pretence would become reality and that the past would somehow be altered and renewed?

She wiped Mary Jean's face, dried her own eyes. She could not sit here for ever. She must do something. The night was growing colder by the minute and the forlorn shore of the

Forth was no place to rest for long. She must not give in to despair. She had arrived at a crucial moment in her life when nothing but determination would sustain her, when she must prove herself to be Gaddy Patterson's daughter in spirit as well as law.

Elspeth pushed herself to her feet. She turned her face from the direction of Stirling and set off along the shore road, heading east, Mary Jean against her shoulder.

As she walked, unsteadily at first, she could hear Gaddy's voice jogging and cajoling her along.

"Come along, m'luckie," Gaddy would say. "Step it out. You're well rid o' that oat sack. It was naught but a burden to a traveller. Come on now, 'Pet, step it out. There will soon be a light t' guide you."

She had gone no more than a mile before a light did come into view, the glimmer of a lantern in the gloaming. She caught too the sound of voices on the wind. Quickening, she rounded a dog-leg in the road and saw the lights of a village on the hillside above her. Relieved, she hurried on towards a humpback bridge that led up the hill to the dwellings.

The cottages had lime-washed walls. The steeple of a kirk was visible against the afterglow. From that angle the village appeared neat and self-possessed. She had run into company too. Along the shore road came men, women and children, quite a procession. They threaded their way across the bridge and into the cobbled lane that led to the heart of the village.

Although the landscape did not remind Elspeth of Balnesmoor, the community seemed homely. She noticed that the girls wore gaudy ribbons and bright clothes. Some sported snow-white pantaloons under knee-length skirts. Only a few of the younger ones were barefoot. The menfolk too were trim in dress, not slouched and ill-kempt. They strolled along in threes and fours with their hands in their pockets, jabbering and laughing as men will, separate from the women and girls.

Elspeth did not head directly into the village. She hesitated on the road at the bridge-end. Common sense told her that a penniless stranger would hardly be welcome. She was wary lest she had stumbled into a mill-town where James might have contacts and connections. She glanced down the shore road. Peculiar shapes loomed in the fields that curved towards the headland, indistinct in the dusk. What held the folk here? she wondered. She was sure that it was not a farming community. Uncertain as to what to do next, she loitered, watching.

The man was about forty years of age and he walked apart from the other men. By the hand he held a girl of ten or eleven and was preceded by a younger girl and a boy. It was the young girl, no older than eight, whose quick, assessing gaze first fixed on Elspeth, who gave her brother, for so the boy appeared to be, a nudge with her elbow.

"I wonder, sir," Elspeth stepped forward and addressed herself to the father of the family, "if you would tell me the name of this place. I'm a stranger to these parts."

He wore tweed and moleskins and a hat dyed azure blue. A cotton scarf was knotted in the gullet of his shirt and his half-length boots, Elspeth noted, were of calf leather not cheap hessian.

The girl who clung to her father's hand was tiny. She rubbed herself daintily against his flank and stared up at him to see what her response to the stranger should be.

It was, however, the youngest child who gave Elspeth an [illegible]

"This is Placket."

The man admonished her without anger. "Sarah, hold your damned tongue."

"Aye, Daddy."

He studied Elspeth carefully then nodded at Mary Jean.

"She's not sick wi' the contagion, is she?"

"No, sir, it's only a cold."

"Is that the God's truth?"

"I've no reason to lie."

The man nodded. "This is Placket, as she says."

The girl-child by his side giggled.

"Are you – are you weavers here?" said Elspeth.

The man tipped back his head and bellowed with laughter. The sound of his mirth attracted the attention of four men who hung about the bridge on the far side.

"What's all your roarin' for, Jock Bennet?" one enquired.

"Hear this, this lassie takes us for weavers."

"Weavers, b'God. She'd as well tak' us for dancin'-masters."

"By the look o' her, Jock, she might be worth weavin' with, eh?"

Sarah, the solemn child, explained. "Placket belongs to the pit."

"What pit?" said Elspeth.

"Mr Bolderon's pit. The Abbeyfield," Sarah answered.

"The best damned pit in Christ's own kingdom," the boy put in. His father did not chide him for the blasphemy. "Where have you come from that's never heard o' Placket or the Abbeyfield?"

Elspeth had learned not to give direct answers to questions about her place of origin.

She said, "I'm here in search of work."

The man, Jock Bennet, suddenly lost interest in the banter of his friends. He snapped his head round and scrutinised Elspeth with a frown, as if he found some puzzle in her.

"Davy," he said, "take Sarah up t' Mr Nicol's an' wait inside until I come."

"But, Da—"

"Go on wi' ye."

Sarah turned on her heel and walked, prim and obedient, away across the bridge. Davy, grumbling, trailed her. The elder girl seemed favoured. She was not dismissed. To secure her position she scrambled on to the bridge post and transferred herself to her father's shoulders. Arms about his neck, she clung to him. He ignored her.

"Work?" he said. "So you're in search o' work, are ye? And what sort o' work are you fit to do?"

"I can tend cattle, milk, thresh, plant—"

"Nah, nah, lass. Nothin' grows on the Abbeyfield."

"I can also cook. Plain fare. I can sew."

"Where's your man?"

"I have no man."

"What about the bairn? Has she no father?"

"Her father's dead."

"Dead – or run off?"

"Dead, a full year ago."

"Was he a weaver?" Jock Bennet asked.

"He was – a drover."

"Aye, so you're a drover's wife?"

"I was."

"Drovers are a hardy breed."

"Hardy enough," said Elspeth, guardedly.

"Step closer to me, girl," Jock Bennet said.

She came forward a step or two, enduring his close inspection.

The years with James Moodie, as mistress of Moss House, had softened and refined her and, even after months of hardship, much of that refinement remained. But Elspeth had the woman's instinct that told her that the pitman was not interested in her looks, that, whatever else he might have in mind, it was not his intention to wheedle her instantly into his bed.

"Can ye cook good meat?" he asked.

"Meat of all sorts," Elspeth replied.

"We eat meat in our family. Ham and mutton. On Sundays, prime beef," Jock Bennet said. "No skink for coal-hewers." He paused. "Look, I've a corner in my cottage if ye want it. There's a hot fire in the grate an' food on the table. As you can see I've three livin' children who need tended."

"But no wife?" said Elspeth.

"I buried her two years since. Aye, an' one before her."

Elspeth could not afford to hesitate.

"I'll tend for you," she said. "In return I ask only food and shelter for me an' my child."

"I see you've no baggage."

"You see right, sir."

"Is it only work you're anxious for?" Jock Bennet said.

"What do you mean?"

"It's not a place in a man's bed, is it?"

"If that's your offer, sir, I'll thank you an' be on my way."

"Nah, nah," said the pitman. "That's *not* part of it. I want it clear from the start I'm lookin' for neither wife nor strife."

"An' I'm not after a husband," said Elspeth.

The girl-child hitched herself up on her father's back. She leaned her chin against his cheek and scowled at Elspeth.

"She's no' comin' home wi' us, is she?"

"Would ye not like that, Mousie?" the man said.

"We're no' needin' her, Daddy."

The pitman did not argue with his clinging daughter. Ignoring her complaint he peeped into the folds of the shawl at Mary Jean, who had fallen into a light, wheezing sleep.

"I hope she's not a bawler," he said.

"Not when she's warm and fed."

"How old is she, pray?"

"Twelve months." Elspeth lied to save further explanation. "My husband never looked upon her face. He was gone before she was born."

She told only half a lie. Mary Jean's father had died before her birth. But he had not been a drover and he had not been her husband. She seldom thought of Michael Blaven now. He belonged to an unclouded past, like a dream only dimly remembered.

Jock Bennet shrugged, unimpressed by such ordinary tragedy.

"Well, girl, if you've a mind to accept my offer," he said, "I'll give you room in my cottage in exchange for fair work."

"Daddy, we're no' *needin'* the likes o' her," the girl-child protested. "Sarah looks after us fine."

"Mousie, hold your damned tongue."

Elspeth said, "I'll accept, sir, an' gladly."

"Very well," said Jock Bennet. "Come wi' me."

"Where are we going?"

"To Nicol's, to the grocery shop."

Without another word the pitman stalked across the bridge, his daughter still clinging like a jackanapes to his back. He paused at the bridge-end just long enough to allow the group of miners an opportunity to admire his new acquisition.

"By God, Jock, ye've found a fair treasure there."

"She's too bloody good for a crabbit old devil like you."

"Man, I'd steal her for m'self – if it wasn't for the wife."

"Well, she's exactly what I've been lookin' for," Jock Bennet declared and, dismissing with a wave of his hand the great hoot of ribald laughter that went up from the men, strode on into the lane.

Trustingly Elspeth followed him into Placket which, in that raw March gloaming, seemed so warm and welcoming, and hid its pain so well.

* * *

From time to time Anna Sinclair might pretend that she was wasting away from unrequited love but the truth was that 'the arrangement' at Strachan Castle suited her down to the ground. Never before had she possessed the right to have things all her own way. The shape and proceeding of her life to that point, which seemed so strange to outsiders, was to Anna quite plain and simple.

She had been born to Gaddy Patterson and Coll Cochran, was sister of sorts to Elspeth, had been forced into marriage with Matt Sinclair, had become the mistress of the laird of Ottershaw, had conceived a child and, when her husband had finally shown his true colours and become an outlaw sought by the law officers, she had been absorbed into the Sinclair family and moved with them from Ottershaw to Strachan Castle as part of the domestic staff of the laird's brother, Gilbert.

It was – all that – no more than the drift of circumstances, and Anna did not question it or relate it to the outlandish things that had happened to her sister, Elspeth, who, in Anna's candid opinion, deserved all the trouble that she had brought upon herself.

The birth of her son gave Anna even more power. She fell to manipulating those around her secure in the knowledge that she would not be flung out, that because Gibbie was answerable to Randall and Randall, laird of Ottershaw, would never let her down, her place in the servants' hall was as safe as the Bank of England.

Gilbert Bontine had acquired the lease of the ramshackle little castle soon after Randall limped home from the war to claim the ancestral estates of Ottershaw for his own exclusive use. But a bargain had been struck between the brothers. Gibbie had been given Lachlan Sinclair, the grieve of Ottershaw, to aid him in developing the land around Strachan, in exchange for which favour he had agreed to tend the welfare of Randall's mistress, Anna, and the child that she would bear.

The beauty of it all, as far as Anna was concerned, was that nobody was quite sure which of the two men who had loved her had fathered the child, whether indeed she had given birth to a 'genuine' Sinclair or to a bastard son of Ottershaw. Anna was perfectly willing to let Bontines and Sinclairs fret over the mystery of her son's paternity. She firmly believed that he had been conceived during a matching with Randall Bontine for, if passion was a proper criterion for conception, little Robert Cochran Sinclair was most certainly the laird's natural son, whatever the parish register showed to the contrary.

In February, when it came time for the baby to be formally christened in the dismal kirk at Rothwell, Anna steadfastly refused to consider any name that might tip the delicate balance of uncertainty. She picked the nice unaffiliated name of Robert, added to it her father's surname, Cochran, to make the weight, and thus revealed no prejudice. To the Sinclairs, however, she confided her belief that Robert was really the son of Matt, her husband, while to Mr Gilbert she hinted that the blood of the Bontines flowed in the little chap's veins.

There were folk in Balnesmoor and Ottershaw who gleefully declared that Anna had been abandoned by the laird of Ottershaw and sent to stay with Gibbie at Strachan as a punishment for her sins. Anna did not see it in that light. Her days in the sun had been fleeting but Strachan was no jail and she was no more confined there than she had been in the hut on the hill of Drumglass or, indeed, in the cottage in the pine wood that she had shared with Matt. She still had her dreams and fantasies and being drawn into the bosom of a family as tightly knit as that of the Sinclairs, under the protection of the vague but benevolent Gilbert Bontine, allowed her to cherish the illusion that, one day, Sir Randall would send for her, marry her, make her into a fine lady with servants and carriages and closets full of silken gowns. To the realisation of that end Anna regarded her son, Robert Cochran Sinclair, as essential.

Over and above his value as a bargaining pawn, however, Anna adored Robbie for his own sake. She could not deny her feelings for her son and was surprised that motherhood had so swept her away. Though she did not plan that particular manipulation it was her honest worship of the child that gradually turned the Sinclairs' resentment into toleration and, in time, into guarded affection. The menfolk, in particular, were willing to forgive her anything for, in contrast to Aileen and Catriona Sinclair, Anna was quick-witted, bold and lively, and had the knack of warming men with her attentions.

Lachlan Sinclair had now faced up to the fact that his elder son had behaved foolishly and he was inclined to regard Anna as a victim of that foolish behaviour and not a partner in it. Besides, Lachlan badly needed a place to put his pride and a grandson was an ideal repository, and in the grieve Anna found an ally.

Strachan Castle, however, did at times seem very far away from Ottershaw, though it was no more than seven miles on dry roads, and there were moments when Anna felt herself to be under siege there, haunted by the past and its uncertainties and by things that she did not quite understand about the workings of her destiny and its connection with Elspeth.

In flickering winter nights, in the melancholy mists of dreary winter dawns, in the shadowless twilight of short winter afternoons, Anna sometimes imagined the lurking shades of retribution, saw Matt and Elspeth, Elspeth and Matt, twined, not like lovers but like wraiths.

The servants' hall at Strachan did not have the rigid demarcations of authority that were to be found in the halls of other grand mansions. The Bontines were an incongruous mixture of extravagance and parsimony and, in spite of Mistress Alicia's ambition to raise the castle to the equal of Ottershaw in Lennox society, the manning of the estate showed up the niggardly aspect.

Lachlan Sinclair was certainly in charge of all groundsmen, a group that consisted mainly of day-labourers hired by the piece from farms round about. Aileen had charge of the house, under Alicia's command, of course, and also attended to the cooking. Catriona was both day maid and nursery helper, though a poor wight, Edith Simmons, was employed to keep the Bontine brood from wreaking too much havoc about the place.

Anna's tasks were varied. She milked a bit in the evening, collected laundry for the boiling-tubs, trimmed candles and filled oil lamps and acted as a 'spider-chaser' when nothing else offered itself. She was also expected to 'assist' her father-in-law in the fields when he required it of her, though the long winter season had thrown up little work that a woman could do since the breaking of the ground was considered too heavy for a female.

Even so, Anna used this appointment to take time out of doors where Aileen could not drop a broom or duster into her hand and steer her towards the dining-room or the downstairs parlour or even into the 'long hall' which had the proportions of a byre and was impossible to keep clean.

The Bontines lived in the 'east wing', which meant a warren of small apartments beyond the hall. The resident servants, that is the Sinclairs, had beds in neuks and presses about the kitchen, warm and snug enough in that well-fired region of the house. In fact the Sinclairs had the best foothold in the castle, with ready access to the yard's log and coal cellars, the water-pump and a privy fashioned out of stone and which flushed by a tug on a handle and was certainly the most modern appurtenance on the estate.

It was about ten of the clock of a crisp March morning when Anna, with Robbie slung in a shawl at her hip, popped out of the laundry door and headed in the direction of the privy. She did not visit there, however, but darted round the corner out of sight of the castle's windows, went on over the bridge that straddled the stream into the ten-acre field. Here a handful of cattle grazed on tumbledown grass and her father-in-law, quite alone, was pacing out a rectangular area which would be fenced for ploughing-out and re-seeding, come spring.

Though Lachlan never said as much, Anna suspected that he was not sorry to be back with his feet in the muck, an earth-labourer instead of a supervisor. He had left much of his dignity behind at Ottershaw, though he still held his shoulders square and had that stern solemn gaze to him. He had been handsome once, Anna supposed. He was handsome enough now for an old man of fifty-three or four. She could see traces of that handsomeness in Sandy, though, at eighteen, with his growth full, Sandy was not so tall as his father and not so broad in chest and shoulder as his brother Matt had been.

The baby bounced quiet and happy by Anna's hip. She hardly noticed the weight of him, though his limbs fleshed out more every day and his infant features had character and his hair was coming in thicker and darker in hue. She grinned and clucked at him as she opened the wicket gate into the field.

The ground underfoot was lumpy, cut up by cattle, but the frost had not come out of it yet and the sharp morning had laid a fine white fur upon the tussocks and coarse leys. Arm wrapped about Robbie, Anna trod carefully across the field.

Mr Sinclair, intent upon his calculations, did not notice the young woman at first. He wore a knee-length coat of brown whipcord and a fan-brimmed hat that had faded with weather from black to slate grey. The coat flapped about his shanks as he paced out the distance from one marker to the next. In both hands, like an offering, he carried a large white stone, the size and shape of a quartern loaf, and his breath made little white puffs in the cold clean air as he audibly counted out his steps.

Anna waited until he had reached the point of the rectangle, until he stooped and placed the stone upon the grass. He straightened, a mite stiffly, drew a long billet of paper from his pocket and, with a pencil from behind his ear, still muttering, jotted down yardage and made a calculation.

"Mr Sinclair." She still called him that, in spite of their intimacy. "Mr Sinclair, see who's here."

Cattle in a corner by the willows lifted their heads and blinked as if she had asked the question of them. Lachlan Sinclair turned. The muttering ceased immediately. He stuffed the paper away and hastened towards her.

Anna lifted the baby, shawl-wrapped, from her hip and held him up, a form of handling to which Robbie did not seem to object in the slightest. There was little enough of him exposed. In the swaddle of soft wools, only his eyes and the tip of his nose could be seen, but when he caught sight of his grandpa he became animated and excited, struggled, girned angrily, and craned out from Anna to greet the man.

"It's as well if you take him, Mr Sinclair," said Anna. "He'll not be content wi' me when he can have you to hold him."

Flattered, Sinclair untied the knot of the shawl at Anna's shoulder and swung the baby-bundle into his arms. Robbie blew a bubble, gave a milky hiccup then kicked his legs within the bindings to show his grandpa how he would pace a field in a year or two.

Mr Sinclair's cheeks creased; a smile.

"Have you started the wash?" he asked.

Anna answered, "I've built an' lit the fire an' filled the tub to the brim. The water'll take a while to boil on a cold day like this, though."

"Aye, but if it stays dry Mrs Sinclair will be anxious to see the spring wash begun."

It was as close as the formidable Sinclair dared come to a reprimand.

Anna knew all about the importance of the spring wash. God knows, there was hardly a clean kerchief left in cupboards and chests. Even her own bedding, in the boxed bed tucked between kitchen and stillroom, had a stale odour to it and, she suspected, might even harbour a flea or two.

March and early April, given dry days, would see a flowering of cloths and clothing on every lawn, hedge and bush. Even the autocratic Bontine children would be press-ganged into lugging baskets of laundry hither and thither and the evenings would be hot with the smell of flat-irons and smoothing stones. Anna, however, would limit her involvement as much as possible, except when it came to the ironing which was one domestic occupation that gave her pleasure.

"Robbie wanted to see his grandpa," Anna said, in a tone of sweet apology, as if household commands were miraculously issued by her son. "I'll go back in five minutes, I promise, Mr Sinclair."

Sinclair grunted then adjusted the baby against his shoulder while he did a shuffling dance and sang a snatch of a psalm tune to entertain him. Robbie hiccuped again, unimpressed.

"When will the strip be ready for the ploughin'?" Anna asked.

Sinclair broke off his song. "When the frost comes out."

"Are there strong horses t'rent hereabouts?"

Strachan did not possess one let alone a pair of the draught-horses that were needed for heavy ploughing. The work could be done with ponies but a light blade would not penetrate far into the soil and the resulting grass layer, however well sown, would not smother the weeds that lay hidden below.

So intent was he on romping about with Robbie that Mr Sinclair hardly heard Anna's question. In a year or so, when the wee chap was toddling, old Lachlan might get no work done at all.

Anna was not sure that it would matter if the fields remained untended, as they had been for decades. Mr Gilbert did not seem to need the revenue that the acres would bring in. He had departed from the age-old Bontine tradition of transforming property into pounds and had gone into banking.

Strachan had no rent book to speak of, four cottages, and a flour-mill hardly bigger than a toadstool, and a grazing-patch between the low road and the river which was leased for sheep, at a peppercorn rent, to one of the local tenants. Everybody knew, though, that Mr Gibbie had had his fair share of old Sir Gilbert's legacies and none of the servants doubted that they would be secure under Young Gibbie's protection for the rest of their lives.

"Robert," Lachlan Sinclair was saying to his grandson, "Robert was the name of a king of the Scots. He fought a great battle against the English, not ten miles from here. An' he beat them hollow, so he did. Will you be a brave warrior when you're grown, m' lad?"

The menfolk of Ottershaw, over whom Sinclair had ruled with rod of iron for so many years, would have been amazed at the change in the man, would have thought that grief instead of grandfatherhood had stolen his reason.

"He's a prince, Anna, is he not?"

"He is indeed, Mr Sinclair."

"I wonder if his father will ever see him?"

Anna's enjoyment of the morning diminished instantly. Lachlan's reference to his outlawed son – who dared not return home at peril of his life – had come unexpectedly. The grieve seldom mentioned Matt's name. Even Aileen had given up snivelling in corners at the thought of her lad driven out of Scotland into lifelong exile.

"He – he might," said Anna lamely.

"It would be a fine thing for us all to be together," said Mr Sinclair with a sigh.

"Aye," Anna diplomatically agreed. "Aye, it would."

Mercifully Robbie took a hand in the conversation and gave out that champing sound which meant he wanted all the attention and not just a part of it. Mr Sinclair discarded wishful thinking and bucked off like a thoroughbred to give the bairn a ride down to look at the cattle.

Anna did not follow him.

She watched, half smiling, and stretched her arms above her head and breathed deeply of the milder air that the sun had brought with it. She smelled the unthawing and, she thought, the first faint sappiness of the spring season unlocked after the long dour winter; then she turned her head and saw it.

The thing was black, glinting black, like a coffin carved from ebony, an image that rose in Anna's mind the moment she caught sight of it above the hedges that separated the low road from the field. It seemed hideously out of place in the bright, white morning. Its menace, and the fact that she did not know what it was or what its appearance signified, made her cry out under her breath and crouch down slightly as if to hide.

Sinclair had also stopped some fifty yards away, half-way between the thing and Anna. He too must have been startled by the carriage's abrupt appearance. He lowered Robbie against his chest and wrapped both arms about the baby in a gesture of protection.

Neither the grieve nor his daughter-in-law had heard the carriage approach, and the horses, high and handsome though they were, were hidden by the hedge. Only the raised, black-painted hood of the cabriolet was visible above the thorn. So out of place did that unique Frenchified vehicle seem on the low road that Anna, even as she recognised it, could not believe the evidence of her own eyes. The jingle of harness trappings came to her, the whinny of one of the horses, and then she saw a figure she could identify – Tom Tolland, James Simpson Moodie's steward and, this past six months or so, his keeper and his nurse.

Anna moved forward over the rutted ground until she stood behind her father-in-law who, having recognised Tolland too, did not hasten to greet the man, though grieve and steward had been acquaintances for many years.

"What – what can he want with us?" Anna whispered.

"Perhaps he brings us news of Matt."

"Of Matt?" said Anna, thinking that it was more likely to be news of Elspeth.

Once it became clear that James Moodie's story that his wife had been sent away to spend time with his sister was naught but a face-saving lie, there had been much speculation in Balnesmoor. Some claimed that Elspeth had gone chasing after Matt Sinclair. Anna did not subscribe to that calumny. Elspeth's childish infatuation with Matt had been long ago dispelled.

Anna could not understand why Elspeth had fled from Moss House where she had had everything that a woman could desire: servants, fine clothes, carriages and the devotion of a wealthy husband; yet Elspeth had torn herself from James Moodie, and from Balnesmoor, without a word to anyone. Moodie had gone quite mad with grief at the loss of his beloved wife and baby daughter. The grim, resolute, pragmatic Moodie had been turned by love into a pathetic idiot. Hard to swallow – yet true, as every gossip in the district could attest.

Now the cabriolet, which had been seen not at all upon the roads since autumn, had appeared on a string road below Strachan, and Tom Tolland, in his rusty black suit and Sabbath hat, was climbing down from it. It could only mean that an event of some magnitude had taken place, and Tolland brought news of it. Logically Anna thought of her sister, Mr Sinclair thought of his lost son – and both were afraid.

"Sinclair, do you not recognise me?" Tolland called out, taking off his hat and waving it.

"I see you, Tom Tolland. What brings you here?"

Bobbing behind the thorn, Tolland cried, "How do I get through this cursed hedge?"

Sinclair and Anna remained rooted in the centre of the field while the cattle, startled by the sound of a strange voice, louped away in a straggling line to the far side of the pasture where they congregated and swung round as if to make a stand against an unseen threat.

"Walk down a piece," Mr Sinclair called. "There's a stile of sorts yonder."

The hedge had been spread by the insertion of two stout posts with turves ramped against them on the lane side and a crossbar roped across their tops.

While Tolland waddled down the road in search of the entrance Mr Sinclair handed the baby back to his daughter-in-law and told her to return to the house.

"No, I will not," Anna retorted.

"It is not your business, Anna."

"How do you know it's not?"

Tolland had found the stile and was cautiously mounting it, the round black hat tipped to the back of his head.

Mr Sinclair frowned.

"It – it may be nothin'," he said, "but a sociable call."

"In which case there'll be no harm in me stayin'."

Robbie had fallen silent inside the swaddle. It was almost as if he was listening to the argument and had determined to take no part in it.

"Come, man, give me a hand," Tolland shouted.

Lachlan Sinclair, who was normally courteous, hurried off to extricate the plump steward from the thorns.

Anna followed. She could see the shape of the cabriolet and the horses through the hedge now and thought that she could even make out another person within the carriage. She lifted herself on tiptoe but had no clearer view and had to wait until Tolland was hoisted into the field and the grieve and the old steward picked over the grass to her.

Tolland had aged. He wore no wig under the hat and his sparse hair was snow-white. Though he was still on the round side, his features had sagged, and hung pale as dough upon the bones, his eyes circled with grey, as if he had not slept much all that long winter season.

Impetuously, Anna blurted out, "Who's that with you, Mr Tolland?"

The steward did not answer. He had never approved of Anna Sinclair, thought her a wild, dark-haired slut and no fit relative for the former mistress of Moss House.

Softly, sadly, Mr Sinclair said, "It's not about Matt, Anna."

Anna let out her breath but put no second question to the visitor from Balnesmoor. It was obvious by his manner, though, that Tolland had questions for her.

Wasting no time in asking politely after the health of the 'new arrival' or to peep into the shawl at the baby, Tolland said, "Have you heard word from her?"

"If you mean my sister," said Anna, "no, I have heard nothin'."

"Have you heard from your husband then?"

"He would not dare even t' send a letter," said Anna, "in case the Excise officers found it."

"Why do you ask these questions, Tom?" said Sinclair.

"Because I am instructit so to do."

"By your master?" said Sinclair.

"Aye."

"Is he himself again?" said Sinclair.

"He will never be himself again."

"But is he still as – as distressed as he was?" said Anna.

The last time she had clapped eyes on James Simpson Moodie he had been wandering about the roads like a lunatic, wailing and crying across the empty fields for Elspeth to return to him. He had been knocked off his mental pedestal by the shock of her departure and, Anna suspected, by the skein of events that had tangled murder to Moodie's weaving-mill at Kennart. Since then she had heard occasional news from the big houses of Balnesmoor and Ottershaw – though she was much more interested in the doings of the laird than the weaver – for Sandy made trips back to the villages when Mr Gilbert required a driver. But James Moodie had become reclusive and had not been seen about the mill or the parish these many months.

"No, he is better," said Tolland curtly.

It was known that most of the servants of Moss House had deserted the weaver mannie. Kerr was gone, and Betty. Even the cook had found another post, with Mr Eshner in the manse. Only Tolland had remained, loyal through the time of trial – and what Tolland knew of the truth he was not telling, not even to the Sinclairs.

"How is he better?" said Anna.

Mr Sinclair might chide her for her sharpness but she did not care. She could not forget how high-handed Tolland had been with her when Elspeth had been his mistress and she had been nothing but a humble dairy lass on Ottershaw. Now that the authority of James Moodie had been undermined, now that she was mother to a natural son of Ottershaw, she felt herself to be Tolland's equal.

"Tell us, Tom," Sinclair urged. "Whatever passes between us will not become gossip, I promise you."

"He has heard that she's in Stirling."

"Stirling!" Anna exclaimed. "What's she doin' there, so close to home?"

"Apparently she was employed in the bleachfields."

"I thought Elspeth had more sense," said Anna.

"Mr Moodie issued handbills invitin' information," said Tolland. "This is a result."

"It would be your idea, Tom, was it not?"

"What if it was? We've paid out many guineas to charlatans and frauds; also to some honest folk who did bring us word of he mistress."

"We knew nothin' of this," said Anna. "Why did you not ell us?"

"Why should you be told?" Tolland snapped.

"Because I'm her sister, her kin."

The sneer on Tolland's lips informed Anna that nothing had changed. The pompous steward still regarded her as nferior to her righteous sister. The knowledge rankled sore. What did she care where Elspeth had gone to? She, Anna, was he last person in the world that Elspeth would come to in ime of trouble.

Tolland said, "I'm here under instruction. It's not my wish o involve you, Mistress Cochran."

"Sinclair. My name is Sinclair."

"Aye, whatever your name may be, madam—"

Lachlan Sinclair intervened. "Come, Tom, do not be so harp wi' the lass. She has lost a husband as well as a sister."

Tolland sniffed, screwed the scorn off his face with an effort and pressed on. "Since the mistress has never been far awa' from us, since she has been seen in Glasgow as well as Stirling, Mr Moodie believes she's bein' keepit away by persuasion."

"By persuasion?" said Sinclair. "By whom?"

"By your son."

Sinclair's nostrils flared. For an instant Anna thought that he might boil over with temper and run the steward off Strachan land.

"My son's sought by the law for a crime that would mean his neck in a noose," said Sinclair thinly. "Tell your master, Mr Tolland, that my Matt's not stupid enough to tarry in Glasgow or in Stirling just for the sake of a pretty face. *No, hey are not together.*"

"Can you be sure? Have you heard as much?"

"Damn you, Tom Tolland, fine well you know I've heard not a word from Matt. He's gone far away. Surely you canna believe that he would do otherwise?"

Stepping closer, Tom Tolland said, "It's not me, Lachlan. It's Mr Moodie. He's not sound in his faculties. He has it fixed in his head that Matt an' his wife are in hidin' together."

"That is, indeed, madness."

"It is, it is," Tolland agreed. "But it's a reasonable sort of madness. Better than the lunacy of the autumn months when I feared he would do himself an injury. At least he has hopes now." The steward placed a hand on the grieve's arm. "I tell you this, though, Lachlan, if the mistress does not return soon it'll be the death of him an' no mistake."

"Is he so far gone, Tom?"

"The apartments in Moss House have all been sealed. He gave me rantin' orders just before Christmas, orders which I was compelled to obey. If he takes it into his noddle to dismiss me, he'll be left quite alone. Do ye see?"

Sinclair nodded sympathetically.

Tolland went on, "He has shrunk back into the wee room behind the stairs. He spends his days there, an' his nights. He sleeps in a cot not fit for a stable boy. Sups his food there too, though he hardly pecks enough to keep a sparrow alive."

"An' drinks his brandy, I'll warrant."

"Aye, in quantity," Tolland confessed. "I tried to bring in a doctor but he would have none of it. Besides, what good would a sawbones do him? It's obvious he is deranged in his wits."

"Can he not be repaired?"

"How can you repair a broken heart?" said Tom Tolland.

Anna spoke up. "What does it have to do wi' us, Mr Tolland? We can no more cure the weaver Moodie than you can."

"Have you no idea where she might be?"

"None," said Anna. "She has no kinfolk to run to."

"What of Coll Cochran's other children?"

"Elspeth never met them. I doubt if she even knows they exist."

Sinclair said, "What of the mill, Tom?"

"The business ticks over," Tolland answered. "Mr Rudge n’ Scarf manage it between them. Some other enterprises too. took the liberty of makin’ an approach to them to do so.”

“Do they know the true state of affairs?”

“You can keep nothin’ from Rudge,” said Tolland. “He’ll ave his skin off the top of the profits; Scarf too. But they buy n’ sell an’ scratch out markets.”

“An’ the sheep? The Cheviots?”

“The Macfarlanes look after them well enough.”

“How long can it go on thus?”

Tolland shrugged. “Until Elspeth returns.”

“What if she never returns?”

“Until Mr Moodie dies.”

It was Anna who put the question. The words were out of er mouth before she even realised that she had formed the ought. “If the weaver dies who’ll inherit his wealth?”

Tolland seemed taken aback by the question, Lachlan inclair dismayed by the girl’s mendacity.

“His sisters, I suppose,” Tolland said.

“Not Elspeth?”

“Not if she canna be found,” said Tolland.

Embarrassed by the turn of the conversation and its impli-ations, Lachlan Sinclair took the steward by the arm and uided him towards the stile once more, saying, “If you’ve ome down from Balnesmoor just for this, Tom, it’s been a uitless journey. Will you have a taste o’ something in the tchens before you return home?”

Tolland said, “He is with me.”

Sinclair glanced towards the cabriolet. “Is he? He’s given o sign of his presence.”

“Nor will he,” said Tom Tolland.

“Can he not speak?”

“He’s ashamed,” Tom Tolland said. “Shame keeps him lent, I think.”

The men strolled out of earshot. Anna did not follow. She ad heard enough to set her imagination spinning like a eetotum.

Robbie girned in her arms for attention but for once Anna as not all devoted to pleasing her infant. Abstractedly she *heeshed* him, knotted the shawl ends at her shoulder and owered the baby to her side. She turned and walked up the sweep of the field, abreast of the cattle herd, until she could see over the hedge to the narrow road and make out the weaver. He was hunched within the shelter of the carriage hood, haggard, unshaven and as shabby as an old tinker. He did not seem to notice her there on the slope. He crouched over, hands clasped in his lap as if he was praying, praying for a miracle, for Elspeth to materialise before him, all loving and forgiving.

Sinclair and Tolland still chatted by the stile. Anna eyed them with vague concern. Were they talking of money? Were they too speculating on what might happen if the weaver mannie died without a notorised will? Anna could not grasp the value of paper holdings. But she could clearly visualise the mill at Kennart, the mansion of Moss House and, being a drover's daughter, the fat flocks that roamed the three-hundred acres of hill land that ran west from Dyers' Dyke.

Land, property, grazing stock: James Moodie was near as rich as Randall Bontine. If he died before his enterprises could be ruined by pilfering and neglect the inheritor would be fabulously wealthy. If he died before Elspeth could be traced, however, it would all vanish in the stroke of a pen, would be gone to sisters who had abandoned Balnesmoor and their brother years and years ago.

The prospect of such injustice hallowed Anna's greed. It made her fantasy seem righteous, brought sudden ghastly concern for Elspeth's welfare. Somehow her sister must be run to earth, persuaded to return to claim her inheritance and, out of respect for the family tie, to hoist Anna out of humble service and lift her and her son on to a plane equal to that of the laird of Ottershaw.

Wherever her sister had gone to ground, Anna told herself, as she walked back towards the castle with Robbie at her hip, she must be found.

On that March morning Elspeth's loss had become Anna's loss too.

The courtship – the seduction – began within a week of Elspeth's arrival in Jock Bennet's humble cottage.

The Bennets' house stood apart from the torn canvas shacks of the out-workers and the rows of permanent stone-built wellings of the other coal-hewers. It had a little patch of its wn on the west side of the Rutherford burn, a tidal channel ve or six feet wide which served as a communal sewer. At ne time, so Jock Bennet told her, it had been an oversman's ouse and they were lucky to get it. Mr Hector Fotheringham, wner of the lands of Placket, had acquired the accommoations several years ago when the Preston Island pit closed own.

Regardless of the size of the dwelling or how many people rowded into it, rent of a shilling a week was charged. The um was deducted from the fortnightly wage by 'Snippets' mith, the Abbeyfield's paymaster. That, however, was the nly piece of money taken at source, for the manager of the Abbeyfield, Mr Keir Bolderon, was vehemently opposed to ruck systems of any kind and adhered to the philosophy that a man got in his hand what he had earned on his knees.

Jock Bennet also informed Elspeth, on more than one occaion, that wages on the Abbeyfield were the highest in the ingdom, at least for deep-seam men, and that a collier could lo no better in hard cash anywhere. Such 'lectures' on the enefits of labour were part of Jock Bennet's wooing of the retty stranger, though Elspeth did not realise what the collier ntended until his persuasion had taken effect.

Living cheek by jowl with a parcel of strangers was, initially, ifficult for Elspeth. The cottage was no smaller than the sheep ut on the Nettleburn where she had been born and brought p but the Bennet children were lively and quarrelsome and here was a general air of confusion which made the place eem, at times, as cramped as a cattle pen.

Elspeth and Mary Jean were allocated a corner. A canvas urtain draped from a rope provided a modicum of privacy. Elspeth's bed was on the floor. Mary Jean slept in a wooden ot which had served the Bennet children until each in turn utgrew it. Pegs in the wall held clothing and, as soon as she acquired a little money of her own, Elspeth intended to buy a in box to hold her small belongings. The trouble was that she ad no belongings now. The black-hearted carrier had stolen hem and she and Mary Jean had nothing to call their own xcept the clothes on their backs.

No cheat, Jock Bennet lived up to his part of the bargain.

He fed Elspeth and her baby, gave them shelter and a place by his hearth. But he did not dole out one farthing in cold cash for that had not been part of their 'contract'. Sarah was charitable enough to unearth some soft cloths which Elspeth boiled and trimmed to make napkins for her daughter but, that apart, nothing was brought forth to make her existence more comfortable. In her desperation it had not occurred to Elspeth that once she had secured shelter and nourishment the absence of any sort of income, no matter how meagre, would accentuate the fact that she had passed down into poverty.

To rub it in – though Elspeth was not sufficiently cynical to read Jock Bennet's motive – every other Sunday the collier paid out 'wages' to his son and daughters around the communal table. It was quite a ceremony. The children gave no sign that the ritual was new to them and not a normal thing for Daddy to do. Elspeth was obliged to watch and, in spite of herself, coveted the children's shillings.

From the purse in his trousers Jock Bennet would tip out a heap of silver coins, would announce with pride that he and Mouse had hauled that money from the bowels of the earth in the course of ten shifts.

"Fifty-two shillin's," he would declare, stirring the pile with his fingers. The children would sit forward in their chairs like orphans waiting to be fed. "An' Davy's twelve. Amazin' how it mounts up, eh? Sixty-four shillin's."

Elspeth would pretend that she was impervious to the sight of the money spread out among the crocks. But she could not keep her eyes off it, transforming it mentally into new boots and a new light dress for Mary Jean, a little lace bonnet, and a pair of underdrawers to replace the patched and scratchy items she wore now.

"Two shillin's for you, Davy."

"Thank ye, Daddy."

"Four for Mousie."

"I'm goin' to buy ribbon an' a pie," Mouse would declare smugly. "An' put the rest away for rainy days."

"An' for my wee Sarah, a shillin' to spend how she likes."

The performance was skilled enough to have been rehearsed.

Elspeth saw with her own eyes where the money went. It ankled her that Mouse would fritter so much on geegaws and heap trinkets or that Davy would succumb to outrageous luttony and fill a whole bag with sticky cakes and sweetmeats p at Nicol's shop and, in an orgy of stuffing, would devour he lot in one sitting.

Elspeth was, of course, given money. Jock would press the ig, solid, silver coins into her hand, pat her on the shoulder nd tell her what he fancied to eat, admonish her not to be ash in her purchases but to shop wisely – and to return to im any money that was left over.

In the confusion of Mr Nicol's shop in Placket Elspeth was empted to skin from the housekeeping a penny or two for erself. She resisted. She was fearful that Mr Bennet's trust vas naught but a test of her honesty, that if she succumbed to ilfering he would throw her back on the open road.

The only crumbs that fell from the table of the Bennets' pparent affluence came the way of Mary Jean. Sarah would hare her sweet things with the baby throughout the week and eemed, indeed, to budget for such acts of charity. To Elspeth ame nothing that would stick to her fingers, nothing that ould be secretly accumulated and put to use to replenish vorn-out clothes or provide the basis of another 'travelling und'.

"By God, Mousie, we did well this fortnight, did we not?"

"Aye, Daddy, so we did."

"Sixty-eight shillin's we took."

"I'm buyin' beads an' almond cake, an' yon pretty pink lace ankie in Mr Nicol's box."

"Well, ye'll be needin' some extra," Jock Bennet would say nagnanimously. He would select a shiny shilling from the eap and hold it up for Mouse to snap away with her tiny ingers. "You workit hard for that, Mousie. An' ye deserve it."

March passed into April, April into a warm and windy May. Pay-night succeeded pay-night. The pattern of days was egged to the Abbeyfield's shifts, an hour before dawn until lusk, with the notorious 'Saturday shift' to end the working veek.

Elspeth was not idle. She worked hard to make herself eeded by the Bennet family. She spent all day on chores. Twice in the week she cleared out the furniture and scrubbed the cottage from corner to corner. She wrestled with the quantity of soiled clothes that seemed to accumulate in direct proportion to her ability to keep them clean. She devoted hours to preparing evening meals, a hot dish supplemented with the products of griddle and baking-oven. Her efforts were appreciated, but not applauded. So weary were Mouse, Davy and the father of the flock on their return from the pit that it hardly seemed to matter what they stuffed into their mouths or that their blankets were clean and fresh-smelling and the cottage was whisked free of that clinging grit which found its way into everything. Jock Bennet preferred ale to soup. Mouse complained that the bread tasted too much of soda and was not as 'stiff', whatever that meant, as the loaves sold by Mr Nicol. Davy ate what was put before him, every dish drenched in either vinegar or warm treacle.

With solemn little Sarah to assist her, Elspeth could wade through a day's work in five or six hours. If she had not been beset by anxiety about her continued penury and a lingering fear that, even here, James might track her down, she might have settled to enjoy her periods of leisure, particularly in the balmy days of young summer. Settle, however, she could not. She was obsessed by the need to justify herself to Jock Bennet, to win his respect for her qualities as a servant. She remained oblivious to the fact that Jock Bennet needed and wanted no servant, that the hearth and the table were not the hub of his existence and that, to the pitman, all that mattered was the daily haul.

All along, from the moment of first meeting, Jock Bennet had wanted her as a stable-mate for Mouse. He might have taken Sarah below ground with him; it was not decency or conscience that prevented him. She was old enough, was Sarah, to earn a shilling or two. But Jock Bennet wanted more than a pennyweight. He needed a strong, sensible woman to haul out for him. Elspeth Patterson was perfect for the job.

"Fifty-four shillin's. Plus twelve from Davy."

By now Elspeth had forgotten that her father, James Simpson Moodie, would spend that much on a vest or a cravat or a pair of silver-buckled shoes without turning a hair; that such a sum would hardly buy one of the Cheviot rams that cropped the pastures along the ridge of Drumglass. Wealth had become elative: a shilling was a fortune; a half-crown a king's ransom.

"Mr Bennet?"

"What is it, girl?"

"I – I need – I need somethin' of my own."

"What's this?"

"Sixpence. Sixpence each week will do."

Arms square upon the table, making a little fortress about his hard-earned cash, the pitman stared incredulously at Elspeth.

"Somethin' of your own?"

"I must buy – things. To wear."

"Did Sarah not lend you thread?"

"I've nothin', Mr Bennet."

"You had nothin' when I took you on, Patterson. Now you have a roof, a warm bed, food in your belly. Both you an' the bairn."

"I'm grateful, Mr Bennet, believe me. But I need—"

"Tell me, Patterson, d'you think ye earn it?"

"I do what's required."

Mouse gave a squeak of derision. "Sarah can do all that, so he can."

"Are you askin' me for a wage as well as keep?" said Mr Bennet.

"If I had anythin', I would not ask. But—"

"Aye, the money has turned you, has it?" Jock Bennet said. "You suppose it's easy come by because I'm generous wi' it."

"Easy come by!" Mouse squeaked again.

"No, no. I know how hard it's come by. But what more can I do?" said Elspeth. "I need a few pence, that's all."

"Work for it, then."

"I do work for it."

"Och, you're no idler," said Jock Bennet, "an' you're worth he price o' feed t' me. But you're not worth more."

"How can I earn—"

Suddenly, shockingly, she saw what he had led her to.

She stepped back from the table and glanced at Mary Jean who was crawling about, quite happily, in a pile of blankets under the dresser, playing with a broken string of wooden beads that she had found under Mouse's pillow.

"I'll take ye below," Jock Bennet said.

He did not meet her eye. None of them did, not even Mouse.

"Below?"

"Into the seams. I can use another pair o' arms t' haul for me, since you press for it."

Jock Bennet was beginning to make it sound as if she, Elspeth, had suggested that he find work for her in the depths of the pit, almost as if she had begged him to take her below ground.

"What about Mary Jean?" she protested. "I canna take her down with me."

"Sarah will tend her," Jock Bennet said. "Sarah's a sensible lassie."

Elspeth could not deny that, young though she might be, Sarah was the 'sanest' of all the Bennets and had a certain affection for little Mary Jean which was returned in kind by her daughter.

"Who'll keep the house clean?"

"Sarah kept it fine," Mouse put in, "afore you came."

In her weeks on the edge of the Abbeyfield Elspeth had observed much but had learned surprisingly little about the nature of the underground labour. She realised, of course, that it was bullying work, physically demanding and very punishing to the weak. She had a sketchy idea of its routines, acquired from conversations between Mouse and her father and from Davy's complaints about the grinding monotony of tugging a rope on a ventilator flap for twelve hours each day.

Among the women who crowded Mr Nicol's shop there was evidence of the cost of such labour: chronic coughs, rheumatic spines and gout-swollen hands and feet, wounds healed and unhealed, scars and deformities hidden under stoicism and by gaudy scarves and skirts and shawls. Every trade had its 'warpings', though, and Elspeth had paid no particular heed to details of the colliers' craft since she did not remotely associate herself with it.

Money, the fortnightly yield, glinted on the table.

She could associate herself with that, however, with colliers' pay, the rake, the take, the haul: present comfort and future security.

"I – I know nothing of diggin' coal," she said.

"Diggin' coal," Davy hooted. "Women dinna dig. Men dig."

"Women haul," said Mouse.

"Haul?"

"Bring out the coals the hewer cuts. In basket loads, on sleds," Jock Bennet explained.

He fixed his eyes on Elspeth, in contrast to his previous shyness. He sensed that she was interested, that, like a river fish, she was nosing at the bait.

Capitulation was swift. The pitman would never know what, apart from the sight of the money, swayed her.

"How much would I be paid?" said Elspeth.

"One tenth o' my take."

"How much would that amount to?"

"With two haulers," Jock Bennet said, "I can bring out eighty shillin's in the fortnight."

"Eight would be my share then?"

"Sometimes more."

Eight shillings for herself. Eight shillings to spend on clothes for Mary Jean. Eight shillings to divide up, to budget, to save and to spend. First she would buy a cotton dress, then stout new boots, then new underdrawers; then she would begin to put away, say, four shillings every week, and in a year would have a fat nest-egg of a hundred shillings or more, a 'travelling fund' worth the name.

"One tenth of the take, an' my keep?" Elspeth said.

"By God, lady, you're the sharp one."

"You said I was just what you were lookin' for, remember?"

The pitman grinned. "Food but not clothes."

"I'll clothe from my own earnin'."

"You'll have to work hard."

"I'm not shy o' hard work, Mr Bennet."

He hesitated then reached across the money pile and offered Elspeth his hand. She shook it, sealing the bargain.

"Done?" she said.

"Done," Jock Bennet said.

And Elspeth Patterson Moodie, mistress of Moss House and wife of the wealthiest weaver in the Lennox, became that day a collier's mate.

TWO

A Word to the Wise

Whatever it was that Keir Bolderon believed in, apart from the value of capital investment, he would not at that time have subscribed to the theory that he was being guided along life's highway by anything as intransigent as fate.

Manager of the coal-pit on the Abbeyfield Mr Bolderon might be but he was not yet master of his destiny. Chance had long ago inaugurated a shaping process and, whether he knew it or not, Keir Bolderon's future had been cast in the melting-pot and, by the spring of 1816, two years after Elspeth Patterson first wandered into Placket, had at last begun to assume what would become its final, irrevocable form.

None of this mystical nonsense mattered a hoot to Mr Bolderon. Indeed, if Nemesis had writ the names of her protagonists in fiery letters in the sky, most of them would have meant nothing to the mining engineer. He was concerned with policy and practice, with squaring a situation which, not for the first time, seemed to be all at sixes and sevens and left him precariously dependent upon another man's whim. The 'other man' was Mr Hector Fotheringham, heritor of the lands of Placket, owner of the mineral rights to the Abbeyfield, and partner in the business of digging and marketing coal.

Keir Bolderon heartily detested Mr Fotheringham. He suspected that the antipathy was mutual. Both Bolderon and Fotheringham were, however, gentlemen, though of markedly different stamp, and hid their true feelings well, particularly as each remained in need of the other to help wrest profits from the haggard shore of the Forth. Restraint had led to reticence and, during their infrequent meetings to discuss matters of business, conversation hardly rose above a murmur. Only Margaret Fotheringham, Hector's saintly wife, showed any animation over the supper table, and the men were content to let her prattle on inconsequentially until the stroke of ten signalled her bedtime.

Margaret, who longed to please, bade her guest goodnight, curtsied to her husband and retired to her bedchamber where, she claimed, she would 'meditate' for half an hour upon *Christian Truths*, a recent work by Ebenezer M'Gilp, the Edinburgh divine. Bolderon could well imagine that a half-hour spent with a theological book would be the high-water mark of Margaret's day.

Margaret Fotheringham was a woman of exquisite beauty, with hair like spun gold and skin like alabaster, yet Keir Bolderon, who normally enjoyed the company of ladies, had never experienced the slightest twinge of desire for her. Her beauty, like her piety, seemed bloodless. Three children indicated that Margaret and Hector had on occasion put chastity in the closet, though Keir Bolderon preferred to believe that the little heirs of Placket had been found among bulrushes or delivered in napkins dangling from the beaks of swans; the mating habits of such ethereal panjandrums as the Fotheringhams were beyond the scope of his imagination.

At thirty-eight Keir Bolderon was a fine specimen of manhood. He had thick dark brown hair which needed no tongs to enhance it and dark brown eyes which, if not perplexed by some problem or other, had just a hint of roguishness in them and certainly a glint of humour. His features were broad and regular and, to go by the lore of tavern and croft, the cleft in the middle of his chin hinted that he was unusually virile. On the whole, Mr Bolderon had little to complain about when he squinted into the looking-glass on top of his dressing-table. But Keir Bolderon paled in comparison with Mr Hector Fotheringham whose chiselled features and unblemished brow elevated him to a realm of male beauty that most women found irresistible and that most men, Bolderon among them, found repulsive.

Such an ideal couple as the Fotheringhams required an ideal receptacle, and Monksfoot Priory was all of that. Sheltered by sycamores and stately elms it nestled on a promontory east of St Austin's Bay and provided uncluttered views across the river to the parklands of the Grange, the saltpans of Bo'ness and the dim, blue, dimpled hills of the Pentlands dipping towards Edinburgh.

From the lawn below the south façade Mr Fotheringham could enjoy the sight of keel-boats and collier brigs plying the trade that nicely topped up his income from rents and leases. Now and again he was treated to a glimpse of a spanking-new steamship from the yard at Kincardine, the *Morning Star*, say, as it puttered between Alloa and Leith. Though he professed otherwise, Hector Fotheringham did not understand the basic mechanical principles by which steamships were propelled. In them, however, he recognised a future in which he must have a share.

If the prospect of river traffic stimulated the gentleman of Monksfoot he was careful to ensure that his domestic estate was not tainted by too close a contact with the trappings of commercialism. Piers and lading quays were not permitted on the peninsula and diligent planting of shrubs screened out the grubby cottages that marred the half-moon curve of the bay. Nonetheless, from one shady corner of the garden, close by the old sundial, Mr Fotheringham could not help but see something of commercial import, a sight that made his heart shrink within his breast – the ruins of the pit that had once graced Preston Island.

Silhouetted against the fish-skin shimmer of the tidal flats, the ruins served to remind Mr Fotheringham that clay and water could devour money faster than even steamboats could haul it in, that mineral speculation could bring a fellow to ruin faster than whisky, politics or the gaming tables.

Keir Bolderon, manager and partner, did not share the landowner's caution. He was brimful of promises and blandishments, siren songs to which Mr Fotheringham tried to turn a deaf ear.

Anyone who branded Keir Bolderon a mere prattling fool, however, was much mistaken. Bolderon had taken on operation of the Abbeyfield in the middle of a lease period after the previous appointee, a slack and scurrilous rogue named Agnew, had all but brought it to ruin. Agnew had finally absconded by dead of night, taking all the ready cash, including the fortnight's wage packet, with him. For the sake of putting the pit immediately into production Mr Fotheringham had een forced to find a substitute for Agnew rather quickly, and Keir Bolderon had been on his doorstep, so to speak, almost efore Agnew had ridden over the hill.

Bolderon was available. Bolderon had letters of recommenlation as to his ability and his honesty from no less a personage han Lord Mulgrew. Bolderon was on the spot and, then as ow, full of extravagant promises. He had driven a hard argain, though, by demanding not salary or fee for his services ut a share of the pit's net monthly profits. Mr Fotheringham ad reluctantly agreed to Bolderon's demands. But the heritor f Placket had a memory that would shame an elephant nd had not forgotten the man's impertinence, even if the ransaction had proved to be of benefit in the long run.

Monksfoot's dining-room was situated in the basement. The aulted cellar was almost all that remained of the original riory for three generations of Fotheringhams had modified nd 'improved' the building to conform with the popular view f antiquity. Even the cellar had been tampered with, he fireplace embellished with facings of new Italian marble arved with plump cherubim whose bottoms blushed in the low of the good Scotch coals that growled in the hearth elow.

The supper, though, had been no better than adequate and he wine was an inferior claret fished from a tub in the back f the butler's pantry.

As soon as the butler had supervised the clearing of the table - a massive piece of Elizabethan oak – Keir Bolderon braced imself and got down to business.

"I trust, sir, you'll not think it premature," he began, "if I nquire as to your intention in respect of the Abbeyfield?"

"Oh, I have no intention, as you put it, Bolderon, no ntention at all."

Keir Bolderon was used to the heritor's slippery ways. He ressed on undaunted. "Coal digging is a sluggish process and feel it's incumbent upon me to remind you, Mr Fotherngham, that the lease runs out next year."

"I am aware of that fact, Mr Bolderon."

"Boring operations must be put under way soon, if—"

"*What* operations?"

Fotheringham was being deliberately obtuse. Bolderon had submitted several reports on his plan to discover fresh seams and to expand the line of existing ones.

"To chart new seams," Keir Bolderon said patiently.

"The Abbeyfield is a veritable warren of seams."

"Only down to twenty-six fathoms, sir."

"Is that not deep enough for you, Bolderon?"

"The seams are almost worked out. They'll yield great coal only for a limited period."

"What evidence do you have that there is coal below that depth?" said Hector Fotheringham.

"None. But my instinct tells me that we have not had the best out of the bearing strata."

"Thomas Rance's 'instinct' tells him that the site is finished," said Hector Fotheringham.

Thomas Rance was the Abbeyfield's oversman. He had been found and hired by Keir Bolderon who could not disparage Rance's judgement without bringing his own into question. Fotheringham had snared him rather cleverly. Bolderon hesitated. He had to tread with care. He did not wish to antagonise the heritor of Placket at this early stage in negotiations. It galled him, though, that he had to tackle the fellow as if he was an opponent and not a partner.

Seven years ago Keir Bolderon had been so desperate to obtain a piece of the lease that he had not given due regard to the small clauses in the document. He had sunk his own savings into the pit to make it yield profitably on the assumption that Mr Fotheringham would retain him as manager and sharing partner at the end of the seven-year period. Now it was beginning to seem as if the heritor might discard him.

"Thomas Rance is not a manager. He's not paid to take responsibility for expansion schemes," said Bolderon.

"Is Rance not a sound and experienced man?"

"Indeed, indeed he is. But what he has given you, sir, is only an opinion."

"And what is it that you have given me, Bolderon?"

It was he, not Fotheringham, who had organised river transport to tap the Edinburgh markets. It was he, not Fotheringham, who had drummed up the capital vitally required to repair the vents and drainage systems and to replenish the stock of dray-horses. To accomplish all of this in short order

Keir Bolderon had pledged away percentages of his share of the profits. Did bloody Fotheringham now expect him to finance exploration without the assurance of a new contract at the end of it?

Keir Bolderon said, "I'm suggesting, sir, that the modest cost of exploration might repay itself tenfold if bearing seams can be accurately charted."

"Good Lord, Bolderon! Surely you cannot expect me to throw money into expensive schemes on nothing more substantial than your instinct." Fotheringham shook his head. "My father, God rest him, had the best out of the Abbeyfield. He extracted only what could be readily redeemed, lightly hauled and sold in Alloa, without all this unseemly clamour for a city market and carping for costly machinery."

"Your father, sir, with all due respect, had miners bonded to his service," Keir Bolderon said. "Slaves, in other words."

"Idle blackguards they were too."

"They are not idle now, sir, I assure you."

"Indeed they are not, not at the wages you see fit to pay them. Highest rate in all the land, so I'm informed."

"Highest rate for the finest colliers."

"Balderdash!" Fotheringham exclaimed. "I do not believe the myth that claims coal-hewing is a trade into which a man must be born. In my book colliers are not special people."

It was all Keir Bolderon could do to keep his temper. What did this pampered provincial lairdie know of the brutal labour of the pits, of labour of any kind? To Bolderon's knowledge he had never set foot below ground.

Bristling, Keir Bolderon said, "*My* colliers *are* special people, Mr Fotheringham. Few men not born to it would dare work the base seams of the Abbeyfield. Why, most of the colliery owners in Scotland would poach our crews if they could."

"In which case, may I ask, why do the crews stay?"

"Because they are loyal, sir."

"And grossly overpaid?"

Never before had Keir Bolderon heard Fotheringham express such candid opinions. In evading the issue of the new lease Hector Fotheringham had revealed himself with startling clarity. There was no enlightenment in Monksfoot, it seemed, Christian or otherwise.

Keir Bolderon said, "I came to talk of new winnings, Mr Fotheringham, not of old scores."

"What exactly do you want of me, Bolderon?"

"Permission to employ a company of master borers."

"What would these so-called 'master' borers do – apart from soaking me for money in fees?"

"Sink a line of holes to discover the depth and direction of new seams of coal," Keir Bolderon answered.

"Can you not podge up a crew to undertake the work?"

"No, Mr Fotheringham. I do not have the equipment or the expertise."

"If coal *is* discovered, I suppose that will mean the expense of digging new shafts?"

"Not necessarily," said Keir Bolderon. "We might be able to reach the new seams through existing tunnels. In addition there is the old, closed shaft – the Dead Man – which might, by modest repairs, be restored to use."

"It all sounds so terribly – fraught, Bolderon."

"Fraught?"

"Expensive."

Keir Bolderon bit his lip. It infuriated him not to be able to tell if the heritor of Placket really understood the principles of coal-mining or if his indifference was calculated to throw the new lease into confusion.

"I must know soon, sir, if the work is to be costed."

Smiling, Hector Fotheringham said, "Mining has been done here for three hundred years, since first the abbots put spade to turf. I do not think, Bolderon, that we need rush headlong into wild speculations. Let us proceed circumspectly."

"Boring is best done in summer."

"Each year brings a summer."

Mr Fotheringham got to his feet. The meeting was over. Nothing had been decided. No positive conclusion had been reached. Keir Bolderon was not one step further forward. He too rose from his chair, fingers clenched by his sides lest he succumb to the temptation to take the beautiful Hector Fotheringham by his beautiful white neck and shake sense into him.

As Fotheringham escorted the manager towards the steps that led from the cellar to the ground-floor hallway, the heritor said casually, "Of course, it might spur me somewhat if there was evidence."

"Evidence?"

"That these fat new seams exist."

Keir Bolderon hesitated, a foot on the bottom step. He was shorter in stature than the heritor of Placket and he lifted himself deliberately on to the step so that, for once, he would not have to look up to the man.

"What if I find evidence?" Bolderon said. "What if I discover a layer of new coal? Will you then invest in the cost of line boring?"

"I might very well do so, yes."

"So, sir, you are not against boring in principle?"

"Find coal how you will, Bolderon."

"Providing the finding does not cost you money?"

The remark was tart enough to sting Fotheringham. For a fleeting moment there was anger in his hazy blue eyes and a dusky flush marred the purity of his complexion. He regained control of himself swiftly, however, and placed an affable hand on Bolderon's shoulder.

"Rest assured, Mr Bolderon, that I will not let your enterprise go to waste."

The promise was riddled with ambiguities, but Keir Bolderon did not press for clarification. He had the feeling that he would wring no more change from Hector Fotheringham that night.

Servants were all decently abed, for the hour was late, and the heritor of Placket opened the front door for his guest with his own fair hand but, after bidding the manager a good night, closed it again rapidly to prevent vapours from the workings from stealing into his house.

Keir Bolderon stood on the stoup for a minute or so listening to the rattle of bolts and chains as Fotheringham made his place secure, then, with a shrug, he filled his lungs with sweet fresh air.

He was relieved to be out of the stuffy basement chamber and felt weary with the effort of badgering the elusive Fotheringham into making decisions. He trudged around the gravel path as if he was emerging from a back-breaking shift in the seams and not from supper with a gentleman. Sometimes he wondered if the hard but simple life of a working collier would not be preferable to what he did now. Sometimes he wondered if the ungrateful devils who toiled in the tunnels ever spared a thought for the tribulations of their manager. He doubted it greatly. Colliers spared no thought for anyone but themselves. They lived from week to week, from pay-night to pay-night, with no regard for what tomorrow might bring or for the efforts that he and his kind put into securing their future employments.

The grooms had left a lighted lantern by the stable door and by its glow Keir Bolderon untethered his horse and led it along the path that backed the Priory and on to the track that wound away through the shrubbery to the road. Once the road was reached Keir Bolderon mounted and set the horse to a walk. He was in no hurry to be home; he enjoyed the fresh March night and wished to clear his head of the abysmal fumes of Fotheringham's cheap claret.

Riding on the east wind Mr Bolderon fancied he could hear the shriek of the winding-rope and the suspirations of the vent-shaft's furnace. He loved the sounds of industry. He could visualise the activity of the Saturday shift in the tunnels below ground, the burrowing and the hammering, the hauling and the heaving and the flap-flap-flap of the ventilator doors sending breath down into the lungs of the earth.

In the darkness of the young spring night Keir Bolderon experienced a dour sort of affection for the broad busy river and its black-faced shore, for all the men and women who laboured under it, under his protection. What would he do without them? What, in turn, would they do without him, at the mercy of fellows like Hector Fotheringham who would wreck the continuity of their labour just to save a few miserable pounds?

Keir Bolderon spurred his horse to a trot and soon his mind was engaged in plotting his next move in his bid to secure the Abbeyfield's future, and his own, for another fifteen or twenty years.

Tomorrow he had engagements in Leith and in Edinburgh. He must rise with the lark if he was to catch one of Neil McNeil's keel-boats down river, for the keels would be loading by torchlight and would be gunnelled down early to seize advantage of wind and tide. He could not be caught napping if he was to satisfy his passion to share in the coalfield's future, to have his mess of profit as well as power.

For a full, assured partnership in the Abbeyfield, signed, sealed and delivered, Keir Bolderon would sell his soul to the devil, in Hell, in Hanover Street, or wherever the devil was to be found.

Where the coal seam narrowed and bent beneath a ledge of sandstone little Allison Bennet stopped and sat back on her heels. She fumbled with the handle of the sled and, encumbered by heavy skirts and calico pantaloons, manoeuvred the rope between her thighs and gave it a tentative tug.

Obediently the sled grated along the floor behind her, its iron runners emitting a high-pitched *skree* that, even after twenty-two months as Jock Bennet's hauler, still set Elspeth's teeth on edge.

Taller by a head than her tiny companion, Elspeth could not move freely in the tunnel that breasted the 30-inch seam. She was obliged to crouch on all fours, chin tucked to her chest. In her time below ground, however, she had learned a trick or two to allay cramp and acute discomfort. She arched her back and pressed the crown of her head, protected by a canvas hood, against the tunnel roof, squeezed firmly until the ache in her shoulder-blades eased and the bones of her spine clicked and sent tingling warmth into the nape of her neck. Elspeth groaned with pleasurable relief. She stretched her arms out in front of her like a cat to coax the stiffness out of her hips then she too groped for the sled-rope, nuzzled the handle against her belly and made ready for the final, breathless crawl down to Jock Bennet's room.

It was the twenty-first trip back from ladder level. Return journeys were less arduous, of course, than hauls from the face when laden sleds scraped the walls as if the coal was reluctant to be drawn from the bosom of the earth. Even so, the rigours of the night-long Saturday shift were beginning to take their toll.

At this depth the slopes were more taxing than on the upper levels where most main roads had been widened and shored to accommodate the huge, box-sided hods that were dragged along by women shackled in leather harnesses. There were no auld wives at this depth, for a woman had to be supple to negotiate the twists and corkscrew turns of the base seams. Besides, the Abbeyfield's upper levels were all but burned out and provided work mainly for folk who were not willing or able to earn big money hewing and hauling 'by the piece' but had to settle for payment of a fixed wage. This past two years the take of great coal had dwindled and the upper rooms yielded only 'chows', small, drossy coals for which there was little demand on the lucrative domestic markets.

Certain hewers, Jock Bennet among them, would not squander sweat on cutting chows. Jock had been born and bred to difficulty and risk. He had served his time in the foul wet seams of the Calderhead, had survived the gases of Braemore and been lured away from the Crabbe pit near Alloa, which he claimed was too tame for him, by Mr Bolderon's promise of big money for dangerous digging. He had been brought here to scour the seams at the roots of the Abbeyfield, seams that wandered far below the boulder-clays of St Austin's Bay and out under the river, and he loved it.

Jock Bennet vowed that he would have none of snug working, not for himself, not for his servant and certainly not for his children. Jock's bond was to the pit and their bond was to Daddy – and Daddy made them like it whether they willed or not.

Elspeth crept forward. "What is it, Mouse? What's wrong?"

Mouse shook her head in perplexity. "I canna hear anythin'."

Crawling over the sleds Elspeth rested her chin against Mouse's back and listened intently. It was true; no sound at all filtered out of the tunnel ahead of them.

"God save us!" Mouse hissed. "Where's Daddy gone?"

Silence below ground was nerve-racking. Usually the workings were alive with noises. Old pillars creaked under the weight of the overlay. Roof timbers groaned pitifully. Water guddled in the drainage channels and, in the echoing shafts, falling stones gave out fierce, heart-stopping whistles and loads shed from broken creels would rumble like thunder down and down the ladder holes.

Mouse whimpered, "Where's m' Daddy?"

"He'll just be restin'," Elspeth said.

The tunnel's remoteness and the awkward dimensions of he room in which Jock Bennet cut coal combined to magnify very tiny sound, even the intimate, unwitting grunts and heezes that the hewer uttered as he wriggled under the ive black shelf. Elspeth was too experienced to ignore the ossibility that, in the twenty-minute period since their last rip to the room, Jock Bennet had met with an accident.

"He isn't even breathin'," Mouse cried.

There were only two rooms in the low seam. The Ogilvie amily worked the other, seven or eight minutes back towards he ladder bottom. Elspeth strained her ears. She could just iscern the *chak-chak* of Willie Ogilvie's pick but no mutter of oices to suggest that Jock Bennet had left his place and gone own to converse with his neighbour. Besides, they had come ast the mouth of Willie Ogilvie's dig and would surely have oticed if Mr Bennet had been there.

"Give him a wee shout, Mouse," Elspeth suggested.

"Da? Are ye there, Daddy?"

No answer came from the tunnel.

Mouse's agitation increased. She had been employed in pit ork since she was eight years old, half her life, in fact, and xperience told her to look for certain signs and signals that ight indicate the nature of disaster.

She inspected the candle flame, its hue and shape. Sudden hanges in colour or a rainbow mist about the wick would ean a concentration of water vapours in the air. But the lame rose wan and steady, smoke melting into the soot stain n the wall.

"Would you like me to go in first?" said Elspeth.

"Aye."

Unhitching herself from the sled, Elspeth crawled over ouse and, on hands and knees, peered with trepidation into he narrowing. A single tallow, stuck in a tin cup at the corner f the room, glimmered wanly but cast no shadows and gave o suggestion of movement.

"Mr Bennet, are you there?"

By now she expected no reply.

She sucked in a deep breath, bent her head and pushed erself under the rock ledge into the narrow tunnel.

Mouse continued to whimper. It was no mystery as to why the girl was so desperately afraid. If Jock Bennet died the family would be left at the mercy of circumstances. In Bolderon's pit there were no 'societies' or institutions to dole out bread to orphans or attend the welfare of the sick. It was the harsh law of this big-money mine that you fended for yourself or you did not fend at all.

Elspeth wormed down the tunnel as quickly as she dared, her hood brushing on the roof, her breath, shortening in the scarce air, coming in curt panting grunts.

She felt slag prick and jab at her knees, debris pushed out of the cutting. At this depth a hewer had no 'sweepers' to do the chores for him and an hour of every shift was wasted on clearing the work space. The room was hardly more than a tuck in the coal seam, like a fold in brocade. And it was empty.

The slanted stool was still in place under the cut but Jock Bennet's spade and wooden wedges were strewn on the floor as if he had flung them aside in a fit of temper. His clothing curled in a corner like a shed snakeskin.

"Is he dead, is he?"

Mouse had crept along the tunnel hard on Elspeth's heels. She thrust her face under Elspeth's arm and stared into the room and, seeing that it was indeed empty, wailed hysterically.

"Allison, stop it. Stop your noise this minute."

Whatever had taken Jock Bennet might be lurking nearby.

Elspeth shook her head to be shot of such silly thoughts. She was no superstitious colliery lass. She must be practical, positive, must find an explanation for the occurrence.

"Willie Ogilvie might know what's happened," she said.

Mouse sobbed and clung to the young woman in despair.

Elspeth twisted round and put an arm about her, to offer comfort. Poor Mouse: she was neither ugly nor pretty. Plain was the only word to describe her, yet she had a certain appealing daintiness that the callous labour of the pit had not yet managed to erase.

"Da would never leave his room in workin' hours."

Elspeth could not deny it. Jock Bennet worked as if demon-driven, pausing only for a bite of bread or a sup from his bottle or to relieve himself. Elspeth separated herself from the girl-child and inched closer to the coal. The cuts that Jock

Bennet had made were as uninformative as Roman inscriptions. Clearly nothing was to be gained by loitering here. She must fetch Willie Ogilvie. He would know what to do. Elspeth crept backwards into the butt of the tunnel, pressed against the mound of slag that had been flung there; and then she saw it. She uttered a cry of fear. A hand, a human hand protruded from the marl.

Elspeth threw herself away from it, cowering, but Mouse, who had seen it too, uttered an uncertain giggle.

"Daddy?" she said. "Is that you?"

As if in response to the question, the fingers of the protruding hand seemed to wave and, as Elspeth watched in fascination, scooped away loose dirt and made space for an arm, a shoulder and, finally, Jock Bennet's head.

The pitman grinned.

"So there ye are at last," he said, as if nothing in the world was more natural than for him to emerge from behind a heap of slag. "What ails the pair o' ye? By God, Patterson, you look as if you'd seen a ghost!"

Mouse's fears vanished at the first sight of her father, alive and apparently in one piece. "We thought you were done for, Daddy."

"Nah, nah, Mousie, it'll take more than a slide to carry me away." He heaved the upper portion of his body forward and groped, beckoningly, with his right hand. "Give me the tallow, Patterson."

Jock Bennet was as naked as Adam. All hewers worked in a state of nature and Elspeth had long since grown used to it. She picked up the tin cup and extended it towards the man, who took it in both hands and, bobbing his head, squinted up the tunnel.

He said, "Rance isn't down here, is he?"

"No, Daddy."

"We can do wi'out his company tonight."

Mouse giggled again and wiped her nose on her sleeve. She was quicker to appreciate the situation than Elspeth.

"What've you discovered, Daddy?"

"A cavity of some sort."

"Where does it go?"

"It runs east, below this level."

"Is it a fresh seam, Daddy?"

"Aye, I do believe it is, Mouse."

Elspeth said, "I thought all the coal lines petered out here."

"Mr Rance says they do," Mouse added.

"Give Rance a wheel an' chain an' he can build you a bloody hoist in ten minutes but he's as ignorant as a pig about pit bottoms," Jock Bennet said. "It's a seam sure enough. What hour is it?"

"Close to midnight, I think," said Elspeth.

"We've not a moment to lose," Jock Bennet said. "I'm goin' down there again, now you two are here. I'm takin' a light this time."

With his elbows Jock Bennet enlarged the hole. Elspeth could see now that the filling of soft marl had been deliberately heaped against the tunnel butt to act as a cover. Jock Bennet did not want the 'natural cavity' found by prying eyes, especially by the oversman. It seemed, that oblong crack, to be a find of considerable importance to the hewer but Elspeth did not immediately grasp the reason for the Bennets' excitement.

"Where's Willie Ogilvie?" Jock Bennet asked.

"Tight in his room," Elspeth answered.

"Where did ye leave the sleds?"

"At the end o' the broad tunnel, Da."

"Well, if Willie spots them he'll think you've just tapped off for a bite o' supper. It's about that time o' night."

Bennets and Ogilvies had come down within an hour of dawn on Friday and would work without surfacing until dawn on Saturday. It was the dreaded 'long shift', a straight twenty-two hours, a tradition in most Scottish pits and one which Mr Bolderon, in his quest for a top take, honoured and encouraged.

Bennets and Ogilvies did not work in harmony. No more, though, was there open rivalry between the families as there was in other twin rooms on higher levels. Neither Elspeth nor Mouse kept tally of the Ogilvies' haul and there were few exchanges between the Bennet women and Willie Ogilvie's burly daughters when they encountered each other in the broad tunnel or at the ladder foot.

"Did ye see any coal down there, Daddy?"

When he grinned Jock Bennet's tongue showed red as a poppy in his black face.

"Truth is, Mousie, I couldna see a blessed thing. But I could smell it. Aye, I could feel it with my hands. Oh, there's coal below us, an' this hole's the way in."

"How close is it?" said Elspeth.

"It's close. Ten or twelve feet down. I'll not need t' dig far t' bare it for cuttin'."

"Can I see?" said Mouse eagerly.

"Why not?"

Jock Bennet enlarged the opening with his arm and, lifting the candle-cup carefully after him, withdrew into the cavity and vanished from sight.

Mouse went after him and, kicking her heels, also disappeared into the hole in the marl.

Still shaking, Elspeth crept forward and drew herself up the ramp to peer warily into the cavity. She could see the glimmer of Jock Bennet's candle, hear the sounds of his breathing but saw nothing of either man or girl. Presumably they already had climbed below the level of sight.

Even now Elspeth could not grasp the reason for the Bennets' excitement. She assumed that Jock Bennet had in mind the 'reward' of ten pounds that Mr Bolderon had offered to any miner who uncovered a bearing seam. In spite of Jock Bennet's claim that there was coal below, Elspeth harboured doubts on that score. She had more faith in the judgement of the oversman, Thomas Rance, than had any of the male colliers. Mr Bolderon, the manager, was desperate for new winnings, now that the functioning levels were burning out, and she could not believe that Thomas Rance had not thoroughly probed this tunnel as he and his aides had probed every inch of the rest of the workings in the search for coal lines.

Curious, Elspeth dragged herself further up the ramp and put her head into the cavity.

She did not have the wealth of experience that Jock Bennet had accumulated over a lifetime of pit labour but she was free of accumulated prejudices and superstitions. What was more, she had acquired two interesting volumes from a packman, a traveller in books, who had found no sale for his wares in Placket apart from her purchases. She had read enough of the 'new sciences' in the literature which abounded on the shelves of Moss House to be able to comprehend a fair part of the treatises on the formation of the bodies which formed the natural constituents of the globe, of 'fossils' and their meaning, and of the wayward history of mineral mining. She kept the volumes hidden in her chest, had not read aloud from them to the children, as she did with the storybooks in her possession. She realised that the Bennets would pour scorn on such high-flown 'scientific' nonsense and boast that they, as colliers, knew better than any grey-powed professor what secrets the earth contained.

It had occurred to Elspeth as it had not, apparently, to the Bennets, that the 'cavity' might not be a natural fault at all but might be some ancient, decayed tunnel cut out by a miner from a previous era. The Abbeyfield, after all, had been yielding coal for hundreds of years and even the bottom levels had been in part explored in the past.

The fissure did not have the configurations of a tunnel, however. It was more like a cave. There was a steep, short drop to a shoulder-width space and a bottom rimed with fine brown sand. The rock, less compact than sandstone, had a peculiar rough nap that rasped on Elspeth's fingertips.

Something about the crack disturbed Elspeth. Perhaps it was superstition after all, memory of the tales of a lost channel to the river which pitmen recounted to round-eyed novices on their first day down, stories of limestone no thicker than eggshell beyond which the river coiled and slithered secretly, waiting for some innocent to fracture the restraining wall and give it roaring access to the seams. She could hear Jock Bennet's hammer tapping rock. The sound made her flinch.

Mouse giggled in the space below, and Jock Bennet gave a muffled whoop of glee.

Nervously Elspeth whispered, "Mouse, where are you? Mr Bennet, are you there?"

"Aye, aye, girl."

"Mr Bennet, what sort of rock is this?"

"It's millstone grit, lass."

"I haven't seen its like before."

"It's rare on shore fields. The crown of the shire is lidded wi' it, though. Farmers call it the moor rock. Gives damned poor tillage, I'm told."

"But why is there none elsewhere on the Abbeyfield?"

"There isn't, that's all," Mr Bennet answered.

"How did it get down so deep?" Elspeth persisted.

"Liftit on the lava or a torrent o' ice in days long ago," said Jock Bennet. "Listen, lady, it's no' for the likes o' us to question why Nature did things, or how. This slab o' millstone hides a fat seam o' coal, an' that's all that concerns us. Am I not right, Mousie?"

"Aye, Daddy," said Mouse, and added, "Elspeth, the seam's taller than me, I swear."

After a hesitation, Elspeth asked, "Can we get coal out of it?"

"I'll widen the hole, fix a ramp or some steps," Jock Bennet said. "A couple of hours' work."

"Will Mr Rance not send down carpenters to do it?" said Elspeth.

Instantly, Jock Bennet's angry face appeared in the space below the hole.

He shouted, "This is *our* seam, girl. Thomas Rance will *not* be told of it. No, nor anybody else for that matter."

"How can you keep it secret?"

"I can, an' I bloody-well will," Jock Bennet declared. 'I'll fit a trap to the hole an' cover it with loose marl. It'll not be seen, I promise."

"Mr Bennet—"

"There's a bloody fortune in great coal down here, Patterson, an' I intend to share it with no man, not until I've had my skim. Do you understand?"

"But Mr Bolderon promised ten pounds—"

"Ten pounds! Hah! What do ye suppose Mr Bolderon'll make out o' such a fat seam? A hundred times ten. Bolderon may have his share, but only at my rate."

"Rate?" said Elspeth.

"Twenty full baskets to the shift."

"Mr Bennet, Mouse an' I canna manage so much."

"You'll manage."

"But can you cut twenty baskets in a shift?"

She should not have asked the question of a man like Jock

Bennet. By impugning his skill she angered him still further.

The pitman spat in disgust. He wiped his mouth with his wrist, leaving a smear of white flesh like a scar across his cheek.

"If I find I canna do it m'self," he vowed, "I'll bring our Davy down to help me."

"Davy?"

"An' Sarah too, if I must."

"Sarah's too young for bottom work, Mr Bennet."

"She's strong enough t' help me load."

Elspeth was silenced. How could she hope to penetrate the pitman's ingrained prejudices, make him understand that Davy would be unlikely to last a month in the foul air of the deep seam? Hard labour at this level would destroy the boy, who was pushed to fulfil his stints as a trapper in the air current just below the ventilator shaft.

Jock Bennet climbed from the hole, leaving Mouse to scramble behind him in darkness.

Elspeth would have beaten a retreat but, confined by the narrowness of the tunnel, she could not even turn around. Jock Bennet caught her by the wrist and thrust his face close to hers, his eyes sullen.

"Listen, Patterson, I know what's right for me an' mine. You're not my bloody wife, remember."

"I just thought – Davy's so young."

"God, I'd been bound to the face for three years when I was his age. He's thirteen. It's high bloody time he learned t' hew coal for his livin'. He canna go on just tuggin' a rope all his days, can he? Cuttin' will make a man o' him. Am I not right, Mousie?"

Mouse had emerged from the hole and pulled herself off the marl with an arm about her father's chest. She draped herself against him, lovingly.

"Aye, Daddy," she said.

"Keep your neb out o' Bennet business, Mistress Patterson."

"I – I will, Mr Bennet."

He did not release her wrist just yet but drew her closer still, so close that their noses touched and she could taste his breath on her lips. "One word to anybody about what we've found here an' I'll break your bloody neck." He dunted her brow with his. "Do ye hear me, lady?"

"I hear you, Mr Bennet."

"Fine. Now that's settled you'd best fetch the sleds."

Wriggling away from the pitman, Elspeth turned and crawled into the narrow tunnel, trembling.

It was not just speculation on what hard labour might do to Davy Bennet or the thought of solemn little Sarah Bennet brought down into the tunnels that distressed her. She could not properly explain her coiling dread, dread of the fissure, of that slanting crack under the millstone which, according to her knowledge of natural laws, should not have been there at all.

It was two years almost to the day since the last positive 'sighting' of the wayward wife had been relayed to Moss House and had caused James Simpson Moodie to shed his melancholia and live in a glow of hope for a week or two.

The weaver's right-hand men, Robert Rudge and John Scarf, had both been despatched to Stirling to take report from the woman who had seen and recognised Elspeth and had so foolishly challenged her.

Rudge and Scarf were cynics. They did not for a moment believe that Jamie Moodie would ever hold his young wife in his arms again and had privately agreed that it was some dark secret of the bedchamber that had driven Elspeth to forsake their employer. Even so, Rudge and Scarf were thorough. They questioned the woman, made written note of all she had to say – which was precious little really – and judged that she had indeed encountered Elspeth Moodie upon the Stirling bridge. They paid out the guineas that the handbill promised, and rode out together along the five turnpikes that stretched away from the town to question innkeepers and the like. Scarf discovered a carrier who had picked the woman and child from the roadside and had taken them four miles east, to the crossroads at Gaines, and left them there. And it was there that the trail finally petered out.

In spite of Elspeth's belief that her father had spies in every quarter of Scotland, this was not so. The range of James Moodie's influence was limited. It did not extend upwards into Fife or eastward into the Lothians, though John Scarf, agent and wool-buyer, scattered the yellow-paper handbills liberally in all directions and kept up his personal enquiries until the end of that year.

Throughout the summer of 1814 there had been odd reports, none reliable enough to bear investigation and the paying out of reward money. Tinkers would chance their arm from time to time. Tricksters hither and yon would have a letter penned claiming that, for a sum, they could put a hand on the runaway. But Scarf and Rudge parried the more obvious frauds and Tom Tolland, without telling his master, disposed of the rest. To all intents and purposes Elspeth Moodie had vanished as if the earth had swallowed her up.

After the passage of two full years Tolland no longer believed that salvation for the House of Moodie would come in the shape of Elspeth's return to Balnesmoor. By then the steward had more to worry him than his master's 'madness'.

By the light of late-night candles, tucked away in his cubby, Tom Tolland read of market fluctuations, the steep rise in prices, falling wages, of riots and restrictions, failures and financial disasters. He had already pared the domestic economy to the bone by paying off gardeners and grooms. There were no longer 'appearances' to be kept up and, with most of the rooms closed, he ran the house with just two servants, a cook who lived out and a resident day-maid. He kept on two gardeners and two horse-men, including Luke McWilliams who had been with Moodie since he was no taller than a riding-boot.

Gradually James Moodie sank deeper into himself. Days, weeks, would go by when he appeared to be both deaf and dumb. He would answer no question put to him, would skulk in his room under the stairs, would not take a razor to his chin or a comb to his hair, would not change his linen or his stockings, and certainly would not open himself to 'business' of any kind at all. In these prolonged moods he would pick at the food put before him but drank spirits as if they were water, a pleasure that Tolland did not deny him.

Once each month Robert Rudge would ride up from the woollen-mill at Kennart. Tolland would admit him to Mr Moodie's room. Rudge would vainly endeavour to converse with his employer, would leave upon the table the trading figures and a summary, written in his own upright hand, of fluctuations in market prices. But James Simpson Moodie would not so much as cast his eye upon the documents, would not turn a page, or make a comment that might give a hint as to his wish and his opinion.

What Jamie Moodie did do, which was the saving of Kennart and of Moss House, was sign in a spidery hand the chits for credit and cash that Tolland put before him.

If Rudge and Scarf were not saints, no more were they fools. They understood the business of making and selling woollen goods almost as well as did their master. They saw to it that when one market closed another was promptly found to replace it; saw to it that the quality of products from Moodie's looms was not compromised by his absence; saw to it that the artisans in their employ did not become too strident and demanding and continued to toe the line that Moodie himself had drawn.

They also made sure that Mr Moodie was not cheated by anyone other than themselves. For performing this necessary service they lined their own pockets to a degree by tapping off on most cash transactions a shilling here and a pound there; compensation, so they told each other, for the additional burden of responsibility that Mr Moodie's illness had placed upon them.

Tom Tolland's virtue also had its limits. He too skimmed a few shillings from the housekeeping each week, money to put away against the dreary day when the whole uncertain edifice might collapse and he would find himself on the market at an age when each grey hair would be a mark against him.

At no great cost to the domestic purse Tolland had taken into employment a brand-new maid to replace those to whom he had given marching orders. The girl, Hazel by name, had been picked up at a hiring fair in Drymen. She was a lithe, pretty wee thing, slightly short of a full measure of intelligence. She had not yet learned to give herself airs and did all that was asked of her without a murmur of complaint – and warmed Tom Tolland's bachelor bed once or twice a week without demanding favours in return.

Twenty months trickled past without much change in Mr Moodie's condition or circumstances, except that he became withered and pale and, even in warm summer months, less and less inclined to leave the confines of his room under the staircase. Every so often Tom Tolland would scrape the master's chin, bully him into donning a clean shirt and lead him out to the gig or the cabriolet and take him for a ride in the quiet country lanes in the hope that it might awaken some interest in the world that he, Moodie, had once grasped by the pigtail and which he had all but abandoned now. But Mr Moodie did not respond. He sat hunched on the seat, staring disconsolately into space, did not answer when Tolland addressed him or when some passing acquaintance gave him a greeting. It seemed that nothing could touch him, that he would slide mute and inconsolable to his grave.

About the New Year of 1816, however, changes in the master's behaviour impressed themselves on old Tom Tolland. Brandy decanter and whisky bottle in the 'study' were no longer emptied in the course of the day. All the food that Tolland put upon the master's plate was eaten, not a scrap being left. Mr Moodie even saw fit to stir himself to lay coals upon the fire when it was cold and draw the curtains over the window when night came creeping across the moor.

After Robert Rudge's February visit it seemed to Tolland, though he could not be quite certain, that the monthly trading statement had in fact been read and the wooden chest in which past statements were stored had been taken from its shelf.

Tolland took to listening at the door; heard nothing.

The steward adopted a breezy manner, struck up conversation once more; received no reply.

For all that, Tom Tolland had the oddest feeling that sense was stirring in James Simpson Moodie, that the 'madness' that had clouded his mind was drifting away like mist from the moon. Tolland deemed it prudent to warn Mr Rudge that it would do no harm to prepare for the master's return to cognisance.

It was March, though, before James Moodie drew himself out of the slough of despair into which he had sunk and once more began to communicate.

One night, very late, Tolland found Mr Moodie in the hallway. It was as well that Tolland had not brought Hazel down from the servants' loft but had been occupied by himself in the kitchen, totting up domestic accounts and making them all shipshape. The sound was slight: the creak of a footstep on boards. Tolland was out of his chair and into his jacket and shoes on the instant. He peeped out of the kitchen, saw that the door of Mr Moodie's study stood ajar and, knocking, opened it.

The master, it seemed, was on the prowl. He had prowled no further, though, than the foot of the main staircase. He stood there, all dishevelled and shrunken, staring up at a blink of moonlight that defined the window on the landing. He was mute no more. His 'madness' had become sorrow. He wept.

"I've lost her, Tom," he said, wiping his cheeks with his fingertips.

"No, no, sir. She'll come back in time, perhaps."

"No, I have lost her." James turned. "How long is it?"

Tolland paused.

"You may tell me, Tom. How long?"

"Since last we heard word, Mr Moodie, it's been two years."

"How long since she fled?"

"Nearly thirty months."

"Thirty months?" James Moodie seemed astounded by this revelation.

He shivered. He wore only an untied shirt and trousers and his legs and feet were bare.

He said, "God, Tom, but it seems only a wink of time since I had her with me for the first. She sat up there on the window-seat, I recall, an' stared out at the moonlight on the moor."

To help dispel the awful shadows of the past Tolland removed a candle from its fixed holder and carried it closer to the stairs.

The steward wondered at this new turn of events. He did not understand the inconsistencies of mental disturbance. With Coll Cochran's wife, Etta, it had been ether addiction that had stolen away her reason. With Mother Moodie it had been the ravages of age, pure and simple. But James Moodie's illness had not, it seemed, impaired his ability to remember detail, unless this was but some devious new twist in the progress of the disease.

Tolland shivered too.

"It's cold here, Mr Moodie," he said. "Will ye not step into the kitchen where it's warm? I'll brew us both some tea."

Though the tears had ceased, James stroked his cheeks with his fingertips, pinching and dragging the flesh. It was a strange gesture, not manly. He wiped his fingers on the front of his shirt and continued to stare up at the landing, at the shape of the window cut out of the gloom.

"I did not love her," James said, suddenly.

Ah, Tolland thought, he's not rational after all.

"Now she is dead."

"No, Mr Moodie, no."

"And her daughter – my daughter is gone."

Tolland could not chase the man's thoughts; he had not regained his reason after all. The steward said nothing. James sighed, softly, turned and padded past the servant and into the corridor, into his room, without another word.

Tom Tolland was disconcerted. He did not take himself to bed for several hours after the incident but sat in his chair by the fire with the door to the corridor propped open, listening for any sound or cry that his master might make, ready to hasten to his aid. But James Moodie was in bed asleep, fast asleep, untormented and unashamed now that he had lost her in himself.

Shift's end on the Abbeyfield was not a signal for the immediate downing of tools and a disorderly dash for the buckets. At six o'clock precisely Snippets Smith, the paymaster, would stride from the counting-house to the top of the main shaft, would lean over the brick coping and, in that shrill, seagull voice of his, would cry out, "*Time's up, time's up. All out, all out.*"

Word would pass down the ladders and along the roads and into the rooms and the pit would begin to empty from the bottom to the top. Woe betide the trapper or putter who had drifted into a trance and failed to relay the message promptly to his neighbour. A cuff on the head or a kick on the backside would be the punishment for such negligence of duty, for children were the links in the fragile chain of communication that connected all the sections of the workings.

Women and children were obliged to queue in the tunnel by the checkman's stall, for hewers, as befitted their station, had first call on the bucket. Women and children would have to wait until the men had all been cleared, spinning up, two by two, to the surface, before they could step into the bucket and be cranked up into the sweet fresh air.

For the sake of warmth rather than decency, the men dressed before leaving the seams. Some even covered their heads with scarves of coloured wool to keep their brows from cooling too quickly. The habit made them appear raffish. But even the cockiest collier had lost his crow come the end of a Saturday shift and it was all a man could do to drag himself from the bucket into the milky daylight and trudge off to his bed in one of the cottages along the road to Placket or by the Rutherford burn.

The women were in no better state than their menfolk. Pain gripped all of them in some form, and there was precious little banter on a Saturday morn, only a chorus of moans and groans, lamentations in the dark. Knees were swollen, elbows bruised, brows gashed, eyes all teary and red-rimmed. Lungs and throats were clogged with black dust. The fortunate ones would recover by Monday but some would carry their ailments back down with them and work on in pain and discomfort until their abrasions suppurated or their gullets closed or fever smote them down and laid them off completely for a spell.

Mouse and Elspeth saw Jock Bennet safe out of the tunnel before they toiled wearily up the ladders to the main road and joined the crowd around the water barrel. Mr Rance ensured that the barrel was kept full of clean, fresh water, for workers plagued by thirst might otherwise be tempted to drink from the drains, a habit that led to sickness and disease.

Mouse and Elspeth managed a ladle of water each before the flow of the queue carried them on. Down the length of the high tunnel women were retching as the liquid loosed the dust that had accumulated in their stomachs.

Elspeth looked round for sight of Davy but he was nowhere to be seen and had, most probably, sneaked a ride early in the bucket, which some of the boys managed to do if they could catch the checkman off guard.

Jock Bennet's 'discovery' was far from Elspeth's mind. She could dwell on nothing but thoughts of hot tea and blankets, sunshine and a green breeze, and her daughter's welcoming smile. As she neared the bottom of the shaft, however, she noticed that Malcolm Elginbrod, the checkman, had failed to sign through the last of the coal loads. Several tall baskets were piled by his stall to advertise his incompetence. Tired or not, hewers whose tallies showed in the baskets would have found strength enough to curse the checkman for not seeing their coal to the day's count, particularly as it was a pay-night Saturday and they would now have to wait another fourteen days for recompense for their labour on the last hard loads.

Mouse caught Elspeth's hand and dragged her forward as the empty bucket thudded to the buffer. A hefty woman in baggy pantaloons and pea-jacket punched Mouse in the small of the back and would have kneed her too if Mouse had been less agile.

Hauling Elspeth after her, the little girl clambered into the bucket.

Elginbrod yelled, "*Take away.*"

The horse-men on top drove the beasts into the collars and the bucket jerked and rose, spinning.

Elspeth, as she always did, closed her eyes.

Many pits now had squat, snorting steam-engines to ravel up the cable at a fine old rate of knots but steam power had not come to the Abbeyfield yet. Things were still done in the traditional manner and most of the hewers claimed that they preferred it that way. Cable and rope twanged. The shaft sides shot downward. The ascent was quite fast enough for Elspeth Patterson, thank you. She clung tightly to Mouse until the bucket jerked and halted, and cold, welcome air flooded about her face.

She slapped away Jim Neave's helping hand, pulled herself on to the platform and stepped down on to solid ground.

She was aware of Mr Rance and Snippets Smith standing not far from the shaft, and the acrid odour of dung from the horse-walk and the salt tang on the wind and the prickling pain of light in the eyes. She would have stumbled away in the wrong direction if Mouse had not found her hand and dragged her clear of the steps and off in the wake of the dwarf-shapes that straggled across the field.

Elspeth blinked. She rubbed her eyes and felt momentary disorientation pass. She glanced up at the sky. It was grey with cloud and the wind was strenuous. She doubted if there would be sunshine at all that day.

"Mammy, Mammy. Here am I."

From a hunch of bushes by the old field gate Mary Jean rushed to greet her mother. The child was bustling, sturdy and sure on her feet. Her arms stuck out comically and her face was radiant with pleasure.

Elspeth released Mouse's hand, knelt and caught her daughter into her arms, hugged her and fussed over her with an affection that masked her exhaustion.

"Mammy all dirty."

The joke was repeated at the end of every shift. There was a well-rehearsed response. Elspeth wetted her fingertip and dabbed a smudge of coal-dust on to the tip of Mary Jean's nose.

"See, now we're both the same," she said.

Mary Jean clapped her hands and laughed, buried her face in her mother's coat collar and waited to be lifted for a ride.

Back aching, Elspeth carried Mary Jean towards the gate where Sarah, solemn as always, waited. There was no smile of welcome on the little girl's lips. She was sober, though not surly, and Elspeth had grown used to her manner and the fact that, even at the age of nine, Sarah took her responsibilities most seriously.

Elspeth offered Sarah her hand. If there was need in Sarah Bennet she refused to let it be seen and, ignoring the hand, walked step-in-step with Elspeth, not touching.

"Did Mary Jean eat all her stew?" Elspeth asked.

Sarah nodded.

"Did you have some too?"

Sarah nodded again.

"Was it tasty?"

"Aye. It was grand."

"Did you finish what was in the pot?"

"Aye."

"I'll make more tonight."

"I'll help," said Sarah.

If Jock Bennet carried out his threat to take Sarah into the pit then Mary Jean would have to be put to the school. It was not a school like the one Elspeth and Anna had attended; no teaching was done there. But the widow who ran the establishment was reliable and did not charge much for looking after the very young children who were put into her care. Mary Jean was tall for her age and not shy. Even so, she would not take kindly to the rough-and-tumble of a minder's school.

Changes of any kind made Elspeth uneasy. She had come to prize the drab routine of life on the Abbeyfield. It was her version of security. Here, among the colliers, she had no fear of being discovered by her father. To be free of that fear was considerable compensation for the hardships of pit labour.

Mouse hurried on ahead to make tea and butter bread, the 'morning' supper. Little Mary Jean could not quite understand why Mammy had to go to bed when she was just up and ready for fun. Today, with the weather dry if not warm, Sarah would take Mary Jean outside and keep her amused while the others slept. Not until two or three o'clock in the afternoon would the Bennets begin to stir in their blankets. It would be after four before there was much liveliness about the place.

Shivering, Elspeth trotted the last few steps to the cottage door. Pushed with her shoulder, it opened and the young woman staggered in. Fatigue caught up with her, enveloped her. She put Mary Jean down at once.

Davy was already rolled in blankets in the aisle by his father's bed. Black with grime, wearing only his work shirt, Jock Bennet slouched at the table, a dish of hot tea in his hands. He had enlivened the brew with a drop of whisky from the flask he kept under his bed. His eyelids drooped. He appeared more stupefied than sleepy, as if he might slump just where he sat. He paid not the slightest attention to Elspeth or the children.

The house was clean but marvellously untidy. Sarah did her best. The crocks were all washed and dried and put away on the shelves and only the big iron stewpot remained unscoured for it was too heavy for the little girl to carry out to the backs. It was, Elspeth thought, a far cry from Moss House where there had been servants trained to do the work, and fine linen, delicate china and silver teapots, warm baths and doors that locked.

"Penny for your thoughts," Mouse murmured.

Elspeth dumped herself down on the three-legged stool by the hearth and held Mary Jean between her knees.

She glanced at Mouse, who was stirring sugar into a dish of tea. Considerately she brought it to Elspeth who drank a mouthful of the hot liquid before answering.

"I was thinkin' how much we'll get paid tonight."

Behind Elspeth Jock Bennet stretched out under the blankets and groaned with the pleasure of it.

"Three o'clock, Sarah," he said. "Wake me no later."

"Aye, Daddy."

Elspeth was so tired that she was reluctant to make the effort to rise and take herself to bed.

"Will ye buy me a gingerbread?" said Mouse.

"I will. An' a ginger beer to wash it down," said Elspeth.

"Gi'ger, gi'ger for me too," said Mary Jean.

"What would you like from Mr Nicol's, Sarah?"

Sarah hovered by the table.

She shrugged her thin shoulders. "Cinnamon."

"Cinnamon it shall be," said Elspeth.

"Ci'mon for me too," Mary Jean yelled.

From the bed Jock Bennet growled warningly. He was patient enough with the young child as a rule but they were all bone-weary at that hour and tempers would fray easily.

"*Shh*, dearest," said Elspeth. "Mr Bennet's sleepin'."

Elspeth gathered her daughter and carried her behind the curtain while Mouse crawled fully-dressed into the blankets that were stuffed into the space beneath the dresser. She curled herself into a ball, shielded her eyes from the seep of light with her arms and almost instantly fell asleep.

Sarah had filled a bowl with warm water from a pan on the hob and had placed it on a chair in the corner. Elspeth washed her face and arms clean of clinging pit-dirt, dried herself on a towel and unfastened her outer garments and stepped out of her skirts, a habit that the Bennets could not comprehend. Sarah removed the bowl and towel and thoughtfully drew the curtain on its string.

Quite wide awake, Mary Jean jumped about on her mother's mattress but, when Elspeth lay down, restrained her restless spirits and uttered a tiny "*hee hee hee*" as if this was part of the game too. She stuck her bottom in the air and her face in the pillow and touched her nose to Elspeth's cheek lovingly. Her breath smelled of apples and fresh milk and her eyes were blue as a summer sky.

Elspeth kissed her.

"Sleep tight, darlin' girl."

"Sleep tight, Mammy."

Elspeth was comforted not disturbed by her daughter's small stirrings.

In a minute or two Sarah would silently coax Mary Jean away. They would spend the morning on the shore or along at Mrs Baxter's cottage looking at the chickens and goats that the old woman kept, or playing with the cats that were always assured of a welcome there.

Elspeth closed her eyes and let herself drift, drift like a leaf on water.

Her daughter's breath tickled her cheek.

Outside the walls of the little cottage the March wind rushed about and from the blackthorn trees came the noise of birds, birds that, in Placket's grey spring dawn, twittered but did not sing.

"Why, Mr Moodie, sir, it's grand t' see you up an' about so early in the day," Tolland said.

The steward fumbled with his waistcoat buttons, ran a hand over what was left of his hair. If he had known that James Moodie would recover his wits so swiftly he would have curled one of his wigs for the occasion.

Mr Moodie might be active but he was not wholly himself. His eyes were sunken and his flesh the colour of unbleached linen. He moved woodenly, as if his limbs resisted the dictates of his will.

"The girl? Who is the girl?" James said.

It was odd enough to see the master within the confines of the kitchen but to see him buttering a tear of bread from a corn loaf was like watching a dog do arithmetic. It reminded Tom Tolland that Mr Moodie had not been born into the gentry, like the Bontines, that once, not so long ago, he had lived in a low cottage near the Bonnywell.

James ate the bread without appetite, stuffing it into his mouth, swallowing without chewing. He no longer seemed indrawn but was possessed by a new demon, one which drove him to frantic activity. Concern swelled in Tom Tolland again.

"The girl?" said Tolland.

"A young lass, a stranger to me. In the corridor. Ran as soon as she saw me."

"Och, that's Hazel," Tolland said.

"Who – is she?"

"A servant, Mr Moodie. Do ye not remember when she came?"

"Where's Betty?"

"We dismissed Betty, sir, not long after the—"

James pushed the crust of the bread into his mouth with the palm of his hand, chewed, swallowed. The tendons of his throat stood out like grooves on oak. His eyes were dead again. It seemed, though, that he could now heed his own derangement. He waved his hand to silence the steward.

"No matter, no matter, Tolland. No matter, no matter."

"It was to save expense, Mr Moodie. What wi' so many rooms closed, it—"

"No matter."

Now that he had eaten, the energy in Moodie had no focus. He tore at the rest of the corn loaf, ripping it into four chunks which he then discarded.

Saying nothing, Tolland filled the iron kettle from the water bucket and put it on the hob. The fire was almost out. Hazel should have been down to light it but the master had obviously scared her upstairs again. Order, upon which he thrived, was gone from the day already. He had put up with Mr Moodie's sickness only because it gave him control. He must either be led or be a leader in the house; he could not hang between two bent hooks.

Still toying with the bread, James said, "Is she yours, Tolland?"

"Mine, sir?"

"The girl."

"She's—"

"Is she your daughter?"

"Oh, no, Mr Moodie. She's not that."

"Where are my – shirts?"

"I'll have them brought, Mr Moodie."

"See that you do."

"Are you venturin' out, Mr Moodie?"

"Where's my best – kerseymere?"

"I'll have it brought too, sir."

"See that you do, see that you do."

"Is there anythin' else you'll want, Mr Moodie?"

"I—"

James screwed up his eyes, elongated his features. It was grotesque, like a forester straining to lift a trunk too heavy for one man's strength.

An indrawn breath: "Rudge."

"Ah, you're goin' down to Kennart, sir?"

"Here. Fetch Rudge here."

"I'll send the lad from the stables."

"Tell him – tell Rudge to come – at once."

"I will, Mr Moodie. Will that be all?"

"Refreshment."

"Of course, sir. Will I see to it that the drawing-room's opened an' a fire lighted?"

"Yes, yes, yes."

"Mr Moodie?"

"Yes?"

"It's but half past six o' the clock. Do you wish Mr Rudge fetched from his house?"

"What day?"

"Saturday, sir."

"Kennart?"

"Aye, he'll be at Kennart, I expect. But not so early."

"Kennart."

"In the meantime, sir, shall I make you some breakfast? Cook's not in till seven."

"Is she – your daughter, Tolland? You can – you can confide in me."

"She's just a lassie, sir. From the hirin' fair."

"Look after her, Tom."

"Aye, Mr Moodie. I will."

Tolland sidled from the kitchen in dismay. He had no choice but to send for Robert Rudge, though what possible weight James Moodie hoped to bring to any discussion with his manager, what sort of convoluted plan had evolved in Moodie's brain Tolland could not imagine.

"Hazel," he shouted. "Get down here."

In the kitchen, seated now, James Simpson Moodie played with the fragments of bread, moulding them back into the shape of the loaf.

The whalers had left for Greenland and the Davis Strait. The anchorages beyond the old dock were temporarily vacant, though two schooners of the Rotterdam Sailing Company were tacking towards the harbour and a brigantine from Archangel had just nosed around the beacon and was scudding fast across the wind now that the tide had turned again towards the land.

Inshore, from the Custom House to the Chain Pier, the Port of Leith was packed with luggers, 'whitesiders' and Hull barges, little boats of no particular denomination that made the quays bristle with masts and riggings, while in the vicinity of Coalhill collier brigs and keels exhaled a cloud of granular dust that the breeze whisked back over the rooftops of the town.

Keir Bolderon's sea-legs were fairly sturdy but he had no love of voyaging and was relieved to step ashore, drenched but undrowned, from the deck of the keel-boat *Czar of Perth* that had ferried him across the Forth from Placket. He wasted no time in searching for a conveyance but, to dry himself out, struck off on foot for Salamander Street and the warehouse premises of Phillans, Adams and McNeil.

There was no Phillans in the firm these days. No Adams. The original founders of the merchant trading company had long since been gobbled up by johnny-come-lately Neil McNeil.

McNeil was one of Leith's most famous citizens. The fact that he had ruined a large number of rival merchants, as well as Phillans and Adams, did not seem to matter a jot. He continued to be regarded not just with respect but with affection by all who had not fallen foul of his methods. He dressed these days in a kilt, jacket, waistcoat and sporran, and sported a splendid tartan cloak. He gripped a painted wooden sword with which he would gruffly acknowledge the greetings of all the folk that he encountered about the town's streets and wynds. He was blessed with a soft, round sort of face, cherry-red cheeks and had a halo of snow-white hair which made him appear not just paternal but positively benign. Most people assumed that Mr McNeil's rudeness was an affectation. Keir Bolderon was not deceived.

Neil McNeil claimed to be descended from the clan of that name which had its home on Barra, that lovely isle on the rim of the Atlantic. The truth was less – or, perhaps, more – romantic. He had in fact been spawned out of wedlock by a packman's daughter in Edinburgh's Cowgate and had dragged himself out of it with nothing but a basket of shoddy tied to his back and a tongue as quick as a viper's.

Keir Bolderon found it impossible not to admire a man who had made such a success of things, who, by dint of determined effort, had created a trading empire reputed to be worth in excess of twenty thousand pounds per annum. Close to the bottom of the page of McNeil's interests were the three old keel-boats that lugged coal from the Fife fields to be sold to house-dwellers in Edinburgh.

It was to Neil McNeil that Bolderon had traded away twelve per cent of his slice of the Abbeyfield's profits in exchange for a cash advance of four hundred pounds. In recompense McNeil had been granted right to purchase all the domestic coal which was dug from the Abbeyfield at a discount of five per cent on the market price. Even at the time, five years ago, Bolderon knew that he was being put to the screw but he had been desperate for working capital to knock the pit into shape and had agreed to the trader's usurious terms without much quibble.

One benefit had accrued from his relationship with Neil McNeil, however, for the old man had put Bolderon in the way of meeting with a certain Mr Melrose of Perthshire, another 'investor', and Mr Melrose had forked out three hundred pounds to become a 'sleeping' partner.

The dealing had seemed wonderful at the time. It had enabled Keir Bolderon to whip the Abbeyfield into production after years of neglect by Hector Fotheringham and the more immediate predations of manager Agnew. But it was coal not gold that came out of the ground and now, with the end of the lease period in view, Keir Bolderon had to face the fact that he had traded away just too much of his share for that initial lump of capital. He had not saved enough cash out of profits to make himself independent and was thus obliged to come once more, cap in hand, to Neil McNeil's door.

The door in question was a plain pine board in the plain pitch-pine wall of an enormous warehouse in Leith's Salamander Street. Keir Bolderon knocked upon it and was duly confronted by a lad who carried his name within the building and left Mr Bolderon to cool his heels in the street.

Mr Bolderon was not dismayed. He had grown used to such treatment over the years, particularly from Mr McNeil who had a foible about allowing strangers to see within the confines of his store. After three or four minutes' delay, Neil McNeil appeared in the doorway.

"So it's yourself, is it, Bolderon," he said, in a dry, rasping voice.

Although the meeting had been pre-arranged by letter, McNeil glowered at Keir Bolderon as if he had slithered out of the waves like a merman.

"It is. It is, indeed, sir," said Keir Bolderon, "me."

"Well, I've had my dinner an' I'm due a breath o' air so you may walk wi' me, Bolderon. I'll give ye a mile, no more, for I have many things to concern me this afternoon."

"Most generous of you to spare me time at all, sir."

The old gentleman stepped from his doorway, brushed past Bolderon and turned to the right.

Since last Keir Bolderon had met with him, McNeil had aged considerably. In the space of three or four months, crookedness of character had become visible in his physique. His shoulders were hunched and his hairy knees were bowed and feeble. He used the sword not for waving to folk now but as a crutch and he crabbed slowly along the paving towards the road which would lead them to the links. They would not, Keir Bolderon realised, make anything like a mile. The old chap would be fortunate to reach open ground beyond the warehouse walls before his strength gave out.

It saddened Keir Bolderon to see how the years had shrivelled McNeil and he hoped that the brain had not been reduced on a similar scale.

McNeil concentrated on walking. No word passed between the pair until they had cleared the protection of the walls and the wind gave the old man something to lean upon. He braced himself, fists clasped over the handle of the sword, the point stuck into the grass verge.

"What business brings ye to see me, Bolderon?" he rasped.

Keir Bolderon explained briefly the position that Hector Fotheringham had put him in. He had no need to disguise the facts, for there was no bond between McNeil and the landowner and the old man was too clever to deceive.

After Bolderon had finished, McNeil gazed out across the estuary in silence, the wind flicking the pleats of his kilt and billowing the tartan cloak behind him like a spinnaker. In the strong gusts of air, Bolderon thought, he looked as old and noble as a castle keep.

"So, Fotheringham would have ye finance the search for new lines o' coal but will give ye no guarantee of a partnership when the lease falls due for renewal; is that it?" Neil McNeil said at length.

"In a nutshell, Mr McNeil."

McNeil snorted. "So you canna spend much on the employment o' labour to find new coal since big expense will leave ye bare if no coal's found?"

"Quite so."

"I suppose it'll have occurred to ye that Hector Fotheringham might decide t' dispense wi' your services in any case?"

"That thought did rise in my mind, yes."

"What worries ye, Bolderon?"

"The cleft stick, Mr McNeil. If I do *not* find new lines of coal then Mr Fotheringham will certainly cut me from a new contract. If I put out my own capital to finance boring and *do* find new coal then Fotheringham might also cut me off, having had not only my effort but my money for his profit."

"Will he not negotiate now?"

"He pretends to be vague about it."

"Aye, that's the way wi' men like Fotheringham," said Neil McNeil. "*Is* there coal down there in the Abbeyfield?"

"I firmly believe that there is."

"But you need proof?" said McNeil.

"Yes."

"I'd be needin' proof too," McNeil said.

"What I need, Mr McNeil, is somebody who is willin' to share the cost of exploration with me."

"To what tune?"

"Four or five hundred pounds."

"Have you not got five hundred pounds?"

"Yes," Keir Bolderon said, "but it is almost all I have in savings. I dare not use it all."

"What would ye offer in return for five hundred?"

"The opportunity to extend our present agreement on purchase and transportation across nineteen years, the full term of the new lease."

"What interest have I in nineteen years?" said Neil McNeil. "Aye, or nine for that matter. You'll be needin' to find some other investor. If ye do secure a partnership I'll negotiate the purchase agreement wi' you, in the same or similar terms. You can tell Fotheringham that. But I'm no' inclined to plunge into exploration wi' a man who has no legal claim on the return."

"I understand, sir," said Keir Bolderon. "I trust that you do not think it forward of me to ask for your advice."

"Advice?"

"Who better to advise me on how to solve this predicament than you, Mr McNeil?"

If the old man was flattered he gave no sign of it. He did not respond to Bolderon's appeal but gathered his cloak about him and turned himself away from the river. Slowly he picked his way from the verge on to the road and set off towards the warehouse once more.

Hiding his disappointment, Keir Bolderon followed the trader, measuring his long stride with some difficulty to the old man's shuffle.

He had not, of course, expected McNeil to fall for such a nebulous proposal, which is why he had been so frank and open about it. After all, the Great McNeil had not acquired his wealth by playing long odds, and any transaction that depended upon the scruples of a landowner like Fotheringham had to be regarded as dubious. Somehow, though, Keir Bolderon had expected more from the old man, some sign that they were akin, that he, Bolderon, was a passenger on the same ship, a climber on the same ladder, that McNeil recognised in him a similar sort of energy and ambition to that which had made McNeil what he was today.

Apparently the old man saw no such qualities in Mr Bolderon. He stumped on without a word until the wooden walls of the warehouses blocked off the sea breeze and made the sun seem warm. Only a half-dozen yards from the warehouse door, McNeil stopped. He glanced over his crooked shoulder and, to Keir Bolderon's amazement, grinned.

His teeth were sparse, worn, brown, and the grin had no paternalism in it. It seemed malicious, almost evil.

"Advice, Bolderon?"

"Yes, Mr McNeil, if you care to give it."

"Ach, Bolderon, ye have the grit, man, but ye do not have the guile."

"I've not been cunning enough, do you mean?"

"Money will bring ye coal. Money will find new seams. But you canna throw money into another man's hole."

"That's the reason I need capital."

"Capital you'll have to beg for."

"I beg from no man, Mr McNeil," said Keir Bolderon, sharply.

"Admirable sentiments. But if you'll no' beg, Bolderon, what will ye do for money?"

"Negotiate favourable terms."

McNeil's grin widened. He might have laughed, except that no sound escaped his lips. "You canna offer favourable terms, though."

"Sir, I feel I've earned my share of the winnings."

"Hard work alone is not enough. Find money, Bolderon. Negotiate for it. Sell what you have to give."

"Easy to say, sir. How do I find money?"

The old man leaned his shoulders against the wooden wall. He disregarded the bubbles of pitch that the sun had coaxed from the boards. He eyed Bolderon slyly and, still without sound, laughed again.

"Obtain it as your friend Hector Fotheringham obtained it," McNeil said. "Find your fortune as others have done before you, Bolderon."

"I – I confess I do not take your meaning."

"Get it as I got it, damned be it, all those years ago."

Keir Bolderon held his breath. He felt that he was on the edge of something tremendous. He expected some complicated secret of commerce reduced to a simple maxim, to receive from the lips of the famous old trader a revelation that would change his fortunes for ever.

For once in his life Keir Bolderon was not disappointed.

"How?" he whispered. "Tell me how to do it."

"Marry it, of course," said the venerable Neil McNeil.

Gradations of society had originally placed Mr Robert Rudge n the position of gentleman. His father had not been rich but ne had been educated and had held several positions of trust o true aristocrats. Mr Rudge's elder brother was, even now, secretary to a Minister of the Crown. One of his sisters had narried into the peerage. Mr Rudge, however, had not required so much of society and lacked that spark of vanity vhich might have ignited his ambition.

The truth was that Mr Rudge had become lazy. He wanted ust enough in income to enjoy a modicum of security and peace to indulge the pleasures of the flesh. It was for that reason that he had never married. Since he had found employnent with James Simpson Moodie he had dwelled in a small, stout house on the outskirts of Drymen, attended by a devoted female housekeeper and by a manservant who could turn his nand to most things.

Mr Rudge did not require much to hold this height of comfort. He ate well, drank good whisky and better wine, and took young women wherever he could find them willing. Half the girls in Kennart had been blessed by Mr Rudge's attentions' at one time or another, though he was careful never to meddle with the married ones.

Robert Rudge, however, had reached an age when the thought of giving up what he had gained ruffled his equilibrium and made him not just cynical but irate. Like Tolland, he would find it difficult, if not impossible, to secure another position which suited him as well.

For that reason, on receipt of Tom Tolland's curt note, he came at the gallop to Moss House.

Mr Moodie had summoned him? Rudge could hardly believe t. He had fancied that Moodie had sunk too far ever to be ikely to summon him again. He had hoped that the weaver would peg out indefinitely in a lovelorn limbo, that status quo might be maintained until he himself had reached a stage when retirement from the concerns of business was not only financially possible but desirable.

A month ago Moodie could not have summoned a water bucket if his feet had been on fire. As he spurred his horse up the hill from Kennart to Balnesmoor, Rudge wondered if Tolland had lost his wits too and was exaggerating some garbled phrase that his master had uttered in delirium. But there he was, James Simpson Moodie, if not exactly his old self at least upright in a chair in the library, with something akin to intelligence glinting in his eyes.

No bottles, no decanters, jugs or glasses were visible in the handsome room. The table at which the weaver sat was bare, save for the sheaf of monthly accounts. Profit and loss: October 1813 to February 1816.

Rudge recognised the sheets instantly. After all, he had penned them, reducing a mass of invoices and chits, bankers' orders and debit drafts to an accurate month-by-month summary. He did not do it for Moodie. He did it for the business, for himself. He had nothing to fear from the columns of figures. Clerk McAlpin had checked his arithmetic and Scarf had verified and initialled all the external billets.

Embezzlement was not Rudge's crime. John Scarf and he had practised a less refined form of larceny. Unless Jamie was willing to saddle his cuddy and ride the roads round farms and markets from here to Perth and back again, unless he was prepared to needle carriers and knuckle shipping-clerks, he would find nothing to prove that money had been tickled from his fist by his manager and chief agent. Whole, round and crusty, the trading-records were as neat as pie.

"Tread with care. He's not yet himself," was Tolland's only admonition as he showed Rudge through the hallway and into the library.

Moodie was clean-shaven, groomed, and wore a suit of sober black and a shirt as white as a lily flower. His hair, though, had turned white. His complexion was grey and his mouth was wrenched down at the corners.

Rudge gave a little bow.

"Are you well, Mr Moodie?"

"Sit. Sit," James Moodie said.

His gestures were bizarre, all stiff, as if his joints needed oil.

Rudge seated himself on the small, uncushioned chair that had been placed before the table. He was suddenly nervous; he did not know why.

"I – I see that you have been robbin' me," James Moodie said.

"Not at all, sir," said Rudge, with a calmness that was entirely superficial. "The trading-records have been accurately kept, I assure you."

"No matter, no matter."

It was on the tip of Robert Rudge's tongue to complain at the slander but he thought it more prudent to say as little as possible. It was clear that Moodie was whistling in the dark.

"No matter, no matter," said the weaver again. "If you have been robbin' me, nobody else has. Tell me how the stock stands."

"The exportation orders are being maintained, Mr Moodie," said Rudge, relieved to be asked a question that took him away from theft. "Coatings and duffields are meeting stiff competition from Holland, however, and we cannot long hope to hold against it. Messrs Johnston and Hepple, for instance, have already informed us that they will reduce the quantity of the standing order for yard lengths from September."

James did not nod his head to indicate understanding. He remained rigid in the neck and shoulders and stared at Rudge like a man who must read the movement of lips to make out words.

Rudge went quickly on. "Blanket cloth and flannel, in the mix, do well but, as you'll recall, we turned to finer weave and have not the production that we had on cheaps."

"The – the – the ten-shillin' cloths?"

"The rise in importation duty has affected Mr Moore's American trade again," said Rudge. "It's recorded, I believe, in May of the last year. But Mr Scarf has found a shipper to Germany for the made pieces."

James did not respond, and Rudge went on, rattling out all sorts of facts and figures, neglectful of the fact that his employer had grasped nothing of the affairs of the world for the past thirty months, knew nothing of war and treaties and taxes, the slump in farm prices and the drop in piece-rate which had all the weavers in the country, not just Kennart, grumbling. He, Rudge, had undertaken that cut, not out of greed but from the need to produce cloths competitively.

The community at Kennart might be tight-knit but its weavers were not ignorant of what was taking place in other parts of Scotland. They had sense enough to accept that their lot was better by far than that of their brethren at the handlooms in Glasgow, say.

On and on went Robert Rudge, spilling out all that the master of the mill should know about changes made in changing times, all couched in the commercial jargon which, previously, James Moodie had understood as a child may read an ABC. What penetrated, what engaged, what had relevance now, though, Rudge could not be sure.

He paused, awaiting a question.

None came.

James said, "I – I – require of you an inventory."

"Stock in store, Mr Moodie, is that what you mean?"

"Total inventory."

"Value of property and of engines too?"

"Scarf will know what field holdin's we have. Ewes in lamb and the like," said James Moodie.

He had clenched his fists upon the unopened sheaves of figures on the table before him. His knuckles were bulbous as tubers and white with some sort of effort.

Did he hold physically to his sanity? Rudge wondered.

He felt pity, as well as apprehension. His employer had never required a full inventory before. He fretted over the reason for the request. Was it a madness, a folly too, or did the weaver suspect that Scarf and he had been selling the ponies and the carts and the very timber from the roofs?

"It will take some while, Mr Moodie," Robert Rudge said.

"It must – must be done within the month."

"But why, sir?" Rudge blurted out.

"No matter, no matter, no matter."

"I'm not certain it can be done thoroughly in so short a time, Mr Moodie."

"Must be, must be done, Rudge."

In the past there would have been force, an impatient authority in James Moodie's manner of delivery but now the words were uttered in a low, withered voice that seemed to make its appeal to pity. It was as if the weaver was crying, "Help me", not issuing an order which must be obeyed; a tall order too.

"End of the month, Mr Rudge. I cannot wait."

"Mr Moodie, what is the purpose of this inventory?"

"Evaluation."

"Ah!" Rudge exclaimed.

He need press the point no further. He believed that he understood. James Simpson Moodie wished to put a worth upon himself. He wished to have his value set down in ink upon paper. For the best part of his life, all the years that Rudge had known him, James Moodie had been an archetypal materialist. He had measured his days in feet of cloth, tallied his hours in pennies earned, had had vision enough to expand his mania for turning time into money into a thriving concern which used other folks' time to convert into money too.

That, Rudge supposed, was the whole principle of commerce. But with James Moodie it had become something akin to a religion in which pride and jealous passion had also had their part. Now he had lost it, had felt it dim within him. The sacrifice of the young wife and the daughter had created doubt about the whole purpose and meaning of his existence. He was groping backward into the past, seeking the feeling that had once consoled him, the assurance that he might own not only wealth but through wealth a lease upon his own small soul.

It came to Rudge as both knowledge and sensation. He felt for Jamie Moodie for a brief moment, equated the man's emptiness with his own – and flinched, literally, away from it. All he, Robert Rudge, had to protect him was his fatalism. He knew that he was worth little and would pass unrecorded from the vale of tears, from Drymen and Kennart to be exact, leaving hardly a memory of his time there.

Rudge got to his feet. He swallowed the expression of sympathy that was on the tip of his tongue.

"Will that be all you require of me, Mr Moodie?"

"Everything, everything. Miss nothing out."

It would be a miserable task. It would take many days of weighing, measuring and counting, summoning of tallies from distant farms where the only system of calculation that was really understood was sheep louping a gate to a tick on the fingers, and the sun coming up and going down again. But it must be done.

John Scarf would turn pink with annoyance at this extra burden. But he, Rudge, would convince his agent that the taking of the inventory must be done thoroughly and honestly, without sulking, without cutting a corner or guessing a count.

If poor old Jamie Moodie wanted himself scaled and weighed then he was entitled to have it done. His enterprise and industry had earned him that much. In Robert Rudge's opinion it would not solve his distress or cure the malady that afflicted him. Only the return of Gaddy Patterson's foundlng would do that – and she had vanished like snuff thrown with the wind.

Rudge bowed again.

James Moodie said not a word of farewell.

The weaver sat rigid, staring, knuckles white with tension.

Closing the door of the library behind him, Rudge crossed the hallway where he was met by Tom Tolland who had been lurking in the passage beneath the stairs.

"What did he want wi' you?" Tolland asked, without prevarication.

"He wants an inventory made. An evaluation of all that he owns."

"Dear God!" Tolland exclaimed. "For what purpose?"

Rudge kept his opinions to himself.

He said, "To keep us all busy, I expect."

He took his hat from Tolland's hand and let the steward open the front door for him.

It was still quite early in the day but it took no expert in weather to predict that there would be no sunshine to warm the ewes and promote a grass growth. Cloud lay in ribbed waves out from Balnesmoor and across the loch to the distant mountains.

Rudge adjusted his hat, buttoned his collar, turned.

"Tell me," he said to Tolland in a lowered tone, "is Moodie still mad or is this some wily game he's playing?"

Tom Tolland, having no sure answer, merely shrugged.

"Time will tell, Mr Rudge," he said.

“Of that we can be sure,” Rudge said and, without another word, sauntered off to find his horse, leaving the steward and his master to their own devices.

THREE

Saturday Shifts

Until a year or two ago pay-outs had been conducted in the comfort of Mrs Figgens' drinking establishment on the Placket road. But William – Snippets – Smith would have none of that. Tailor to trade, Snippets had gravitated into clerking and the keeping of accounts because he was as meticulous numerically as he was morally. Mr Bolderon had enticed him away from a desk in the cloth-mill at Alloa and in Snippets had got rather more than he had bargained for.

Each Saturday fortnight, about three in the afternoon, Snippets began his particular 'shift'. He would install himself in the counting-house with his ledgers and strongbox. At four o'clock he would be joined by Mr Rance and a couple of muscular clerks named Henning and McCaffray. On Snippets' instruction they would erect and put in place three wooden tables and cover them with baize cloth. Henning would wheel from a corner a tall, gibbet-like desk.

At five, Snippets would unhook from his belt a gigantic bunch of keys, would kneel before the strongbox and unlock each of its four padlocks. He would lift the lid, unlock the inner bolt, lift a second lid and then extract banknotes and bags of coin that had been saved for the pay-out. These he would pass to Thomas Rance who would pour the money on to the table and begin sorting coins into slotted wooden trays that Snippets had had the carpenters make for the purpose. Colliers were a damned conservative crowd and suspicious of written money.

About a quarter past the hour of five the pitmen would begin to sidle into the yard. Lanterns would be lit, hung on nails on the building's external walls, jugs of whisky and pots of ale would circulate and a general buzz of expectation would enliven the night. Snippets, indoors, ignored the clamour.

About a quarter to the hour of six, chanting would start up, would swell rapidly into a deafening chorus of impatience.

Grimly, Snippets would tug on his grey suede gloves. He would nod to Mr Rance who would take his position on a box directly behind the counting-table. He would nod to Henning who would clamber on to the stool behind the tall desk and would open the ledgers. He would signal to McCaffray to man the door. And then he would wait, wait without conscience, until the hands of the clock on the wall crept to six exactly, and then he would say, "Gentlemen, are you all prepared?"

"Aye, Mr Smith."

"Ready, Mr Smith."

"Admit them."

Poor McCaffray would hoist the bar from the door and begin his fight to ensure that only four men at a time gained admittance, while out of sheer devilment the rabble in the yard stormed the citadel.

Snippets could not understand why pitmen refused to be orderly and well-mannered. Could they not see that the process of payment had been regularised for their convenience and would be speedier still if only they would not brawl and buffet, and harass the doorman?

"Name?" Thomas Rance shouted.

"McClure."

"McClure," Thomas Rance shouted.

"McClure, McClure." Henning would trace his finger down the list of names in the ledger. "Aye, James McClure. Sixty shillin's, less rent o' two shillin's. Pay fifty-eight shillin's, Mr Smith."

Snippets' fingers would deftly pluck coins from the tray and toss them into a huge earthenware bowl which stood in the centre of the table.

When the sum was all counted into the bowl, Snippets would say, "Take your wage, James McClure."

The hewer would scoop the money out of the bowl and pretend to count it, then would shift away from the table as the litany began again. He would make his way to the high desk where Henning would hold down a ledger and a pencil on a string and the pitman would sign his name or make his mark as a receipt.

"Name?"

"Norman Provan."

"Provan. Norman."

"Provan, Provan. Sixty-six shillin's, less rent o' two shillin's. Pay sixty-four shillin's, Mr Smith."

And so it would go on, four men in and four men out, with McCaffray fighting every admission as if he was holding a fort against an invasion by barbarians.

It was twenty minutes after six o'clock when John Bennet squeezed past McCaffray into the counting-house. He had a smug, swaggering look to him that Thomas Rance remarked at once. But the oversman put it down to a high take, for Bennet was known to be a big earner who sweated himself and his women hard.

"Name?"

"John Bennet."

"Bennet, Bennet." Henning paused. "My, my, Mr Smith! It's eighty-eight shillin's."

Jock Bennet found Rance's eye, smirked and shook his hands loosely by his sides as Snippets doled out the wage. The three other colliers in the room gave a cheer of appreciation and Jock raised his fist and punched the air before he scooped out the silver coins and, without bothering to count them, stuffed them into his pocket. He swaggered to the desk to make his mark, a bushy squiggle that he claimed was a signature. He did not, however, quit the desk at once.

He flexed his body, stretched up towards Henning and whispered, "My lad, Davy Bennet; take him off the book."

"Davy?" said Henning, in surprise. "What's wrong wi' him? Is he sick again?"

"Just take him off the book."

Henning was nonplussed. Before Jock Bennet could prevent it the clerk had called out, "Mr Smith, a word wi' you, please."

"What's amiss?"

"Mr Bennet here wants his laddie's name taken off the book."

It was suddenly quiet within the counting-house.

Snippets glanced over his shoulder at Mr Rance who, hands clasped behind his back, rocked on the balls of his feet and regarded Jock Bennet with a probing gaze.

"Is he ill again?" the oversman enquired.

"Nah, nah. Davy'll be in for his wage tonight." Jock Bennet hesitated. "But from Monday he'll be comin' down wi' me. I'll fee him from then on."

"Is it you that's sick then, Bennet?"

"I'm as fit as a bloody flea, man."

"Then why do you need the help of the boy?"

"To clear an' carry, Mr Rance. Yon tunnel's damned tight, if ye recall."

"Not so damned tight you can't pull near ninety shillings out of it," said Rance. "It's hard to believe you can rake even more out of yon hole."

"I can rake enough extra t' pay our Davy."

Some ruffian in the yard took a flying kick at the door, and McCaffray shouted, "Hold your bloody horses, eh!"

Jock Bennet said, "Mr Rance, it's my right t' take Davy down wi' me an' fee him from my earnin's, if I've a mind to."

"That's true," Thomas Rance agreed.

Davy Bennet was sufficiently mature to descend from the upper level and learn how to cut coal on his own account. As operator of a ventilator flap, just tugging a rope all day long, he earned a miserable six shillings per week. On a fat seam, even a weakling could pull down that much. But the room in which Bennet worked was not particularly rich in coal. Besides, the boy was puny and Thomas Rance found it difficult to believe that he would be of much use to his father in the stifling base level.

"Mr Rance," Snippets interrupted, "I am conductin' a pay-out, if you please."

"Take David Bennet off the book," said Mr Rance to Henning, "after he is paid tonight. Is that what you want, Bennet?"

"No more an' no less, Mr Rance. I give y' thanks."

"I wonder if Davy'll thank me," the oversman murmured, as he watched Jock Bennet cross from desk to door.

It was all most peculiar. Bennet had two good haulers in his daughter and the Patterson woman but had surely reached the maximum take that the narrow seam could feasibly yield. The Ogilvies, now that he thought of it, earned several shillings less than Jock Bennet, and Willie Ogilvie was no mean hand with pick and hammer.

"Tom Yates."

"Yates. Tom," Rance called out automatically.

He hardly heard the response. He was intent on watching Bennet until the hewer was let out of the counting-house into the yard, hopeful that the man might say something that would give a clue as to his true intention.

Thomas Rance was not satisfied with the pitman's explanation. There was more to this than met the eye. He would not rest content until he discovered why Jock Bennet, a sly devil if ever there was, needed Davy in the room with him. There was only one way to obtain an answer.

Tonight, Thomas Rance decided, he must go below.

The day had been soft for the month but wintry mist returned with evening, sifting from the hills and along the banks of the Lightwater and over the fields to envelop the castle's tower and yards.

Anna had worked quite willingly that day. She had made sure that her industry had been duly noted by her mother-in-law and even by Mistress Alicia, but had done her share of the outdoors work too without being prodded into it. With Sandy away, Anna had gone to the pasture and fetched the milking cows to the byre, a task she normally considered beneath her dignity.

Because of the chill in the air she had left Robbie in the kitchen in the care of Aileen Sinclair, who certainly did not object to having her grandson to herself for an hour or two. Anna had milked the cows and put them out into the pasture again, then had carried the pans into the dairy for the cream to separate. She had even remembered to light a lantern and peer under the shelves to make sure that none of the estate's slinky cats was hiding in the shadows to have an illicit feast in the dark.

By a quarter past five her chores were done and she was free to hurry to the coach shed to check that the gig had not returned. To her relief she found the place empty, save for the big, dusty old carriage that Mr Gilbert had purchased last November at a Falkirk auction and hoped to refurbish so that the family could ride out in style. In the meantime Mr Gilbert was driven in the gig by either Lachlan or Sandy Sinclair.

Today, Mr Gilbert had gone down the road to Ottershaw to call upon his brother. Sandy had been at the reins. Anna would have sacrificed a year's wage, such as it was, to have ridden to Ottershaw with them. But she, even she, could contrive no excuse for such a jaunt and would have to be content with the news that Sandy brought back.

When Lachlan was the driver he brought back only dull gossip about old acquaintances, comments about the farming procedures of the new grieve, an energetic young bachelor named Hornbeam who, as far as Anna could gather, seemed to be living up to his reputation for efficiency. She cared not a fig about fatstock, crop rotation and the high cost of seed corn. She cared only about Randall. Naturally she could not question Lachlan directly on this subject. She was obliged to hem-and-haw, to put her questions about the laird and his doings indirectly, otherwise Lachlan would have closed his mouth and told her nothing at all. With Sandy it was different. She could pump him for every drop of news without fear of ncurring displeasure. In Sandy Sinclair's eyes she could do no wrong and she milked his infatuation to gain her own ends as she had done with all men daft enough to be attracted to her.

She had only just emerged from the coach shed when she heard a clatter of wheels on the section of paved road that led from the front drive into the yards at the rear. Gig lamps oomed out of the gloaming like two big yellow eyes. Sandy drove easily, relaxed in a manner that Matt had never been. No matter what job he was doing Matt had always seemed ense and resentful, cramped by grudges and ill will. But Sandy ook pleasure in work and was more expert with horses than his brother had ever been. He steered the buxom mare, Maisie, nto and around the perimeter of the yard as easily as if he had been saddled on her and did not have the width of the gig o contend with.

"Hey, lass. Hey, Maisie. Whey now."

He coaxed the mare to a halt with the gig perfectly backed o the coach shed door. Slack rein in hand, he hopped from he board and soon had the animal uncoupled, out of the shafts and into the stable for a brush down and a feed.

Sandy had spotted his sister-in-law the moment he had entered the yard and acknowledged her wave with a wag of the head and a boyish grin.

As he led the mare away he called out, "Extinguish the gig lamps for me, Anna, then come by an' I'll tell you all the news from Ottershaw."

Anna was disgruntled at being given an order by the youngest Sinclair but she was too anxious to argue. Swiftly she unclipped the little square windows of the lamps, pinched out the candles with wetted fingers, closed the doors again and, wiping her hands on her dress, hurried into the stable.

Sandy had already stripped off Maisie's tackle, had backed her into a stall and was brushing dirt gently from her legs and flanks. When that was done he would fill her manger with a mixture of bruised beans, oats and meadow hay, a system of feeding that Lachlan had introduced for hack and road horses in spite of prejudice against it. The feed mix was stored in a slanted bin the lid of which was battened down by four big stones, as if Strachan rats were more muscular and daring than rodents elsewhere in the Lennox.

To show her willingness, and because she could not get close to Sandy while he remained in the stall, Anna opened the lid of the bin, forked out a quantity of feed into an old blanket and carried the bundle to the mouth of the stall, ready for Sandy to spread into the manger.

The young man looked up from his work.

"My, my, Anna! You're bein' uncommon helpful the night."

"You must be fair hungry?" she said.

Sandy stroked the brush down the mare's legs.

"Hungry enough," he said, "though I had a good dinner in the kitchen at Ottershaw."

"Were you taken into the house?"

"Aye."

"Did you see Randall?"

"I saw him – but not in the house."

"Did he – did he enquire about me?"

"I'm afraid he did not, Anna."

"What *did* he say?"

"He didna speak to me at all."

"How did he look?"

"Fine."

"How did he – seem?"

"He seemed as he always seems."

"What was he wearin' today?"

"Trews," said Sandy without hesitation. "Old boots an' the long jacket he's had for years."

"Did he show much of his limp?"

"Aye, it was visible, but no worse than usual."

"Where had he been?"

"With Mr Hornbeam, up in the tree plantin's."

Anna did not pursue that line of interrogation lest Sandy, like his father, be deflected into discussing estate work and not Randall. She asked several other trivial questions to which Sandy gave non-committal replies while he completed his work with the mare and put away the tackle on its hooks.

When he went out into the yard again, Anna followed. She watched him open the shed door and, unaided, run the gig into the shed. Even that effort did not seem to tax the strength of the youngest Sinclair. He emerged, unwinded, dusting his hands in satisfaction.

"There," Sandy said. "Everythin's done. I think I'm due my supper now."

"Wait, Sandy. What else have you t' tell me?"

"The rest was just chatter about aches an' pains."

"No more about what the laird's been doin'?"

"Hunter was hangin' about much o' the time an', as you know better than me, Hunter'll not entertain gossip about his master."

Anna recalled the steward of Ottershaw only too well. She had never been fond of the man, nor he of her. He had resented her for the influence she'd had over his lord and master, for the fact that he could do nothing to harm her.

"Here!" said Sandy. "Where's the wee appendage?"

"Appendage?"

"Robbie, the bairn."

"Watch your lip, Sandy Sinclair. My son's no' an appendage."

"God, he clings t' you like a growth."

"Too cold for him tonight. He's in wi' your mother."

"He's a lucky wee beggar, though," said Sandy.

"What way he is lucky?"

"He gets plenty o' cuddles from you."

"Oh, I see. So that's why ye envy him, is it?"

"I wouldna refuse a cuddle from you, Anna."

He was candid, teasing but not conniving, not as Matt had been when first he had wooed her.

"Would ye like a cuddle from me right here an' now?" said Anna.

"Aye, I would."

"Well, you're not gettin' one," said Anna, laughing. "Not now, not ever."

"Ever's a long time, Anna."

"Sandy Sinclair, you're naught but a laddie."

"Ah, but I'm growin' bigger every day."

"You'll never be man enough for me," said Anna and flounced across the yard to the kitchen door, leaving Sandy by the coach shed, looking after her with rueful longing.

Thoughtfully Sandy closed and barred the coach shed door. He had not expected Anna to give in to him and had kept his true feelings hidden behind chat. For all that, he was disappointed that she had not rewarded him with a quick, sisterly kiss upon the cheek. He had never liked any other lass half as much as he liked Anna. He did not think of her as his brother's wife, as a mother. For Sandy, she still had the fresh, daft sparkle of girlhood; and her teasing ways pleased him.

According to Matt, Anna was a witch who had led him a destructive dance. It was undeniable that she had seduced Randall Bontine and had bedded with the man. But Sandy managed to put all that to one side. Anna was so damned pretty that he could not resist falling in love with her. He was hard-pressed to smother his desire to take her in his arms, kiss her lips and squeeze her against his chest.

Of course, he kept his feelings to himself. His father, mother and sister Catriona would have fits if he so much as hinted that Anna attracted him as a woman is supposed to attract a man. But he would do anything for her – anything that would not give her too much power over him. Sandy Sinclair might be in love but he was not entirely daft.

Today, for instance, he had lied to her. He had not told the truth about his visit to Ottershaw.

He did not wish to be the one to bring news that would surely distress her and probably throw her into a black mood.

Sir Randall Bontine had not been dressed in his working clothes, nor had he come down to Ottershaw from the plantation in the company of his grieve. Sir Randall had been dressed up in his finery and had looked every lean inch a gentleman for the laird had been entertaining guests, a man and a pretty girl.

Sandy had glimpsed them out upon the terrace at the front of the mansion. The male guest was wonderfully well dressed too and seemed, like the laird, to be swaggering, arrogant and carefree. The girl who was with them was as young as Anna and equally as beautiful. She had been wearing an emerald-green riding-habit and a tiny black beaver hat that must have cost ten guineas at least. She had laughed gaily at every word the laird uttered and clung to his arm and fluttered her blue, rapacious eyes at him.

Sandy Sinclair did not have to be a sophisticate to realise what was going on. But how could he tell Anna that he had spoken with Mrs Lacy, the cook at Ottershaw, and that the conversation had confirmed the evidence of his eyes?

"Who is yon gentleman?" Sandy had asked the cook.

"Major Seaton, a friend from the laird's army days."

"How long have they been here?"

"They cam' yesterday an' are said to be stayin' for a week."

Sandy could tell by the way Mrs Lacy imparted the information that the cook knew he would carry it back to Anna and that Anna would be wounded by it. Inflicting hurt was the cook's intention for she too had hated the upstart girl from the hill.

"What about the woman? Is she Seaton's wife?" Sandy had asked, feigning innocent curiosity.

Mrs Lacy had grimaced at his apparent naivety.

"Is she figs his wife," the cook had said. "She's Major Seaton's sister. His *spinster* sister."

"She's bonnie, right enough," Sandy had remarked.

"If you ask me, that bonnie spinster has come here huntin' a husband."

Mrs Lacy had tapped the side of her nose with her forefinger and had given Sandy a knowing wink to impress the point upon him.

"A – a husband!" Sandy had said. "Surely ye canna mean the laird?"

"I can, an' I do, mean the laird."

Sandy was tempted to question Mr Gilbert during the ride home to Strachan Castle but he did not know how to go about it without seeming impertinent. It was, after all, no business of his what Sir Randall Bontine chose to do with himself. Sandy's mother had overheard Alicia and Gibbie discussing the matter of legitimate heirs for Ottershaw, saying, in effect, that it was high time Sir Randall found himself a wife.

None of this information did Sandy impart to Anna.

Let Anna find out about pretty Miss Seaton in her own good time for there, Sandy felt, was a rival that poor old Anna would not be able to defeat.

Enclosed by trees, gardens and grazing-pastures, the village of Placket occupied the face of a steep hill that climbed from the shore to the Malkin, an undistinguished knoll a half-mile inland from the river. Placket's square was small, oppressive and tilted at an angle to the south. It was fed only by a cobbled lane and a muddy track that wandered up to the cornmill.

There was nothing grand about the antiquities that flanked the square. St Austin's church was patched with lichen and streaked with gull droppings. The long, two-storey dwelling on the west side of the square, the abbot's house, had fallen gradually into a state of decay and was now used only to store straw and old fish barrels. The only lighted front in Placket's square was that of Duncan Nicol's shop. It provided a centre for the community and, on pay-nights, had all the bustling cheerfulness of a dancing-floor.

Duncan Nicol was a plump, jolly fellow without an ounce of prejudice against pit folk. He would serve colliers with the same broad grin that he bestowed upon sour-faced fisher-wives or farmers, local inhabitants who thoroughly disapproved of the hordes of godless barbarians that swept in from the Abbeyfield. Nicol was as honest as any shopkeeper could be. He did not put chalk in his flour, water his milk, adulterate his teas or tamper with his set of measures. His shop had a good reputation even among keelmen who had, of course, choice of provision merchants on both sides of the Forth. Coal workers, however, were the backbone and ribs of Mr Nicol's trade and Saturday night, especially on pay-days, brought them out in full force.

Much as Elspeth enjoyed shopping she was still a little apprehensive when she visited the village. It was here that she had severed connection with her 'old life', with Balnesmoor, and here that the two lives touched. She was mildly afraid that James might even now find her trail from Stirling and track her to this spot. When she had fled from Balnesmoor that autumn day in 1813, she had thought that her escape from her father was complete. She had not been in Glasgow a week before she had been accosted and recognised. A weaver mannie, whom she did not know by sight as much, grabbed at her arm, thrust his face into hers and demanded to be told her name.

"I – I am Elspeth Patterson."

"Ye are James Moodie's wife, are ye not?"

Shocked, she had denied it, had torn herself from his grasp and had run away along Argyle Street while the man pursued her, crying out after her as if she was a thief. If she had not had Mary Jean in her arms some honest, enterprising person in the crowd might have tackled her, tripped her and she would have been caught there and then, dragged back to Balnesmoor only days after she had left the place. She had hidden out in a vennel by the cattle market until dusk and had walked eastward out of the ring of the city and put up, very late, in a disreputable little inn on the road to the village of Stepps. Next day she had taken to the road again and had gone on walking, since the weather was fine and she had money enough for lodgings and food, and had eventually, after several days, come round to Falkirk.

There she had taken stock of her position. She had acknowledged that though she had gravitated to a town where she might be recognised, she felt more comfortable nearer home. She would most probably have gone on, gone north into the highland territories, perhaps, if she had not fallen into work in the counting-house of a cooperage and, being in need of income, had stuck there for fifteen weeks.

It was a good job, if not well paid, and Mary Jean was safe with a minder each day. They lodged in a room of a house on the town's outskirts, and were favoured by the keeper of the house, a Mrs Inglis, because they were clean and quiet.

She might have settled in Falkirk, her nervousness might have dwindled with the passing weeks, if she had not encountered a man in the counting-house who believed that she was Elspeth Moodie and not Elspeth Patterson. He was a salt-fish merchant and had a brother in a woollen-mill in Airth who had been given a handbill on a 'Wanted Female Person' by an agent named Scarf. John Scarf. The man was inclined to link Elspeth Patterson with the missing wife and, by insinuations and enquiries, might soon reach the conclusion that he was entitled to the five guineas reward that the handbill promised.

Elspeth left the cooperage and the lodging and went back towards the town of Stirling, intending to follow the road to the west, heading for the remote ports of the seaboard where James did not do business and she might find work on farm or croft, or a place in some small community. She stopped in Stirling, however, to earn a few shillings more. The truth, she supposed, was that she was reluctant to quit the central plain, to strike far from the towns whose names she knew and from people who spoke the same dialect as she did.

The bleachfields gave her piece-work. A hovel in the vennels by Wolf Crag gave her lodging at little cost. An auld wife cared for Mary Jean while Elspeth earned their daily tithe. It was a mean, fettered sort of existence and she was possessed of the feeling that she would inevitably be recognised and this time, perhaps, caught. Perhaps, she thought, that was what she secretly longed for, to have no choice but to return to the comfort of Moss House. But when it came to it she did not surrender, did not give herself up. She fled.

The woman was enormous. She blocked Elspeth's way across the side of the Stirling bridge. The woman was much more sure than the man in Falkirk had been, though again Elspeth had no recollection of having encountered her before. The huge waddling woman clasped her without warning, a bear-hug, and cried aloud: "*Mr Moodie's wife. I have Moodie's wife.*"

How did they recognise her? Did she bear some mark or brand that made her known to them on sight?

She drove her knee into the woman's belly, punched a forearm into her face and dashed away, not for the bleachfields but for the Crag and the house where Mary Jean was in care. And that same evening, in the rain, she slunk out of the town, walking through the rain with Mary Jean girning in a shawl in her arms and her bundle roped to her back.

Constantly she had to remind herself why she had fled from James Moodie. It was not just the shadow of incest that she feared but the shadow of murder. She was far enough removed from Balnesmoor to see that her father had plotted murder. Earlier, he had schemed to have her foster-father ruined. James might claim that he had done it all for her, to bring her to him and to keep her safe for evermore, but she sensed that he might be rid of her too if circumstances turned him against her. She could not admit to herself that she was James Moodie's flesh and blood, that Mary Jean was his granddaughter. It seemed inconceivable that she was linked by an indissoluble tie to that fierce, brooding and unscrupulous man, though the facts could not be denied.

She spent the night in the lee of a hedge on the river-bank, was awakened close to dawn by the voices of salmon-fishers and, hugging Mary Jean to her breast, stole away to the road again and walked on and on until she came to a posthouse where she paid sixpence for bread and milk and a warm by the day's first fire.

Later she had cadged a ride from a carrier who had lifted her eight miles along the river road to Gaines. One short ride had followed another until the thieving old carrier with the cargo of chemicals had put an end to her escape, had delivered her, unwittingly, to the Abbeyfield and to Jock Bennet.

On occasions, even now, however, she would feel the rub of anxiety along her spine, would pause by the wall of St Austin's Kirk and scan the crowd in Placket square to make sure there were no strangers there, no faces from out of her past.

Mouse would say, "What's bitin' you, Elspeth?"

Elspeth would answer, "Nothing. I'm just catchin' my breath."

And Mouse would take Mary Jean by the hand and, with

Sarah following, the girls would scamper across the square to Mr Nicol's shop and, after a moment or two, Elspeth's anxiety would wane and she would go after them.

Elspeth had made no serious enemies among the pitfolk. She was not particularly popular, however, for she kept herself to herself too much for friendships to ripen. Some of the girls were jealous of her looks and imagined that she was hoity-toity, too good to frolic with them. Elspeth cared little what they thought of her. She assumed that they assumed that she was more wife than servant to Jock Bennet but she had no reputation to protect and, if she had been challenged on the point, would not have denied that she was Mr Bennet's woman.

It mattered not to Georgie Haynes whose woman Elspeth Patterson happened to be. Georgie Haynes wanted her and intended, somehow, to have her.

There were willing girls in plenty to be found in Placket but Georgie Haynes had wearied of the kind that would go up the hill with him to roll in the grass behind the cornmill or lie on wet sand under the lading pier. Georgie was twenty-six years old, young and arrogant enough to want a woman he could not buy. And Elspeth Patterson was as pretty as any woman upon whom he had ever clapped eyes and had a certain air to her, a mysteriousness that would make her worth possessing.

Georgie did not quite know why he had become fixated on the woman from the Abbeyfield but, over the winter months, he spoke of her often to his two shipmates and bragged that he would take her before the summer was out. He fully intended to make good his boast.

On that Saturday night in March the *Matchless*, one of McNeil's three keel-boats, was moored on the mud below Placket's north lading. Skipper Hamilton had decided that wind and tide were too strong for a plunge back home to Leith, that they would load and run on the Sabbath day and risk the wrath of the Lord. The truth was that none of the three-man crew had any particular desire to return to their wives across the water and would seize any sort of excuse to stay out upon the river shore. That was the aspect of the life they enjoyed, recompense for the filthy labour of loading and unloading cargoes of coal from the shallow hold of the little beetle-black boat, for enduring cold, wet crossings of the Forth which could often be as rough as an ocean.

Keelmen were much given to drinking, scrapping and wenching and the crew of the *Matchless* were agreed that the Bunch of Grapes served ale as good as any in Alloa or Leith and that the square in Placket on a Saturday night provided a 'cattle show' better than Edinburgh's Haymarket.

Girls young, and girls old enough to know better, were attracted to keelmen. As a rule the sailors were more muscular than collier lads, and taller too. They were free-spending men whose bold, intoxicating promises gave them a glamour far removed from the dull and dirty nature of their work at the quays.

Georgie, for instance, measured six feet in height, had shoulders like an ox and a deep, weather-reddened chest matted with russet hair. His smooth manners and sly, suggestive charm had many a lass falling over herself to gain his attention, even though it was known that he had a wife and bairns stowed somewhere in Port of Leith and that he was nothing but a casual philanderer.

Skipper Hamilton was a quiet-spoken man in his forties. He had worked keels for Mr McNeil for thirty years. He was less 'romantic' than young Georgie and paid for his women in the fond belief that 'matching' for money was not a mortal sin and that he would thus remain faithful to his good lady wife, in spirit if not in ordinance.

The third member of the crew, Lewis Turner, was a gigantic, gangling chap only three or four years older than Georgie. But already the glint had been extinguished from his eyes by addiction to spirits and he was happier lying in the slops on the floor of a tavern than in the sweet grass of the Malkin with a girl. It was Turner who had fished for information on the pretty young woman whom Georgie had first noticed back in the autumn. From Turner, Georgie had learned how Elspeth Patterson had come to work on the Abbeyfield, that she had a bairn, and that she shared a cottage and probably a bed with pitman Jock Bennet.

Georgie did not have a chance to begin wooing before winter came. Short hours of daylight curtailed the activities of the river rovers. He did not dare ferret down into the cottages in search of her, of course, for pitmen distrusted strangers and would have covered him in tar and slung him in the cesspool, like as not, if they had caught him in their territory. Come March, however, Georgie was ready to begin his courtship, to impose himself upon the Patterson woman as a man who is any sort of man must do with a woman who has snared his fancy.

She was plain-dressed that evening and walked sedate as a lady, not with the bustling, swinging gait of other eligible girls; modest, Georgie thought, demure.

He stepped out of the shadow of the arch of the abbot's house and cut across by the old pump, calling out as heartily as if he was greeting an old and dear friend, "Ach, if it's not Mistress Patterson."

She stopped dead, swung round. In her eyes was something that Georgie could not name: horror, panic.

Surely he was not that unattractive to look upon, not with the coal muck sluiced from him and clean clothes fresh from his locker upon his back.

He smiled and took off his cap.

She was still staring at him, one hand raised before her as if to fend him off.

"I've been seekin' an opportunity o' makin' closer acquaintance, Mistress Patterson," Georgie Haynes said; he had practised the speech and thought it damned pretty. "You'll recall seein' me before. I nodded t' you, an' you were gracious enough t' nod back."

She did not seem to recall. She blinked, stared at him and retreated three or four quick little steps towards the shop.

Georgie went after her.

"I'm the keelman. I'm Georgie Haynes," he said, offering his hand, rolled over at the wrist the way he had seen gentlemen do when they greeted a lady.

She retreated again.

Georgie pursued.

Behind the Patterson woman, from the congregation by the shop, a child separated herself, a girl of nine or ten years. Georgie glanced at her, found himself disconcerted by the solemn intensity of her gaze. It was almost as if she could see right through him and, in spite of her youth and innocence, read what was on his mind.

"Surely this canna be your daughter, Mistress Patterson?"

"I'm not her daughter," Sarah retorted.

"Your sister, then?"

He could not for the life of him get the Patterson woman to open her mouth. It was the little girl who answered once more.

"*She* bides in *our* house."

"My – my daughter's inside," said the Patterson woman.

"An' is she as bonnie as her mother?" said Georgie.

He gave a salty little bow.

Now she had opened her mouth he would press the advantage. Candy talk was reckoned to be his strong suit and he had jawed more than one shy maiden off her feet.

Encouraged, Georgie Haynes moved in.

Elspeth's first thought was that the keelman had identified her, that somehow he had got wind of the fact that she was the runaway wife of James Simpson Moodie of Balnesmoor, and, like the salt-fish merchant in Falkirk, had accosted her and engaged her in conversation with the sole intention of proving himself right.

Heart thudding, mouth dry, Elspeth was paralysed by uncertainty. His question about her daughter did not allay her fear. On the contrary, it would seem a natural sort of question for the situation she had imagined. Inwardly she cursed Sarah for intervening.

When the man came into the light, close to the shop front, Elspeth realised that she had seen him in the square on several occasions, that he was certainly what he claimed to be – a keelman – and that his interest in her might have no connection with the past. She forced herself to make reply and when he stepped closer she instantly, and with relief, sensed the truth: he was no agent, no spy. He intended to flirt with her, not betray her.

This man, Haynes, would not be the first to insinuate that he would like to strike up a friendship with her. Elspeth was not naive. She was not shocked by the crassness of his advances, that mock-gentlemanly behaviour which colliers, as well as keelmen, thought of as a precursor to the making of improper suggestions. No doubt he had watched for an opportunity to separate her from Mouse and Sarah, to have her alone. If Mr Bennet had been in the vicinity the keelman would not have dared doff his cap.

Elspeth could not keep the relief out of her voice.

She answered his last question. "Oh, my daughter is far bonnier than I am, Mr Haynes."

"She must, then, be a bloody angel come down from Heaven."

"I give you thanks for the compliment, Mr Haynes."

"Georgie is my name, Mistress Patterson."

"Well, Georgie, it has been a pleasure t' talk with you but now I must be on my way. I have purchases to make."

"Stay for a minute."

It was only a flirtation, a clumsy attempt to woo her. Elspeth's relief increased.

She laughed. "I must do the buyin' now, Mr Haynes, before all the best cuts are sold."

"I could bring ye meat from the flesher in Leith."

"I doubt if I could afford the price, Mr Haynes."

The conversation was interrupted by half-blind Betty Pickard who burrowed through the folk in the shop doorway lugging a wooden bucket filled with steaming tripe.

The smell wafted about in the evening air and pulled after it, like pups chasing a rope, a gang of small boys who smacked their lips and yapped in exaggerated hunger. Betty trailed her daughter Ginny by the hand. Ginny was but twelve years old, yet, when she caught sight of Georgie, she turned all winsome and coy and straightened her shoulders and thrust out her budding breasts and set her head on one side and, as she brushed past the keelman, said, "Good evenin' t' you, Georgie."

Georgie Haynes ignored the child who was gripped by the forearm by her mother who, blind or not, knew what the girl's tone signified and whipped her quickly away across the square into the shelter of the lane to smack her for her brazen insolence.

The little boys followed, still dogging the tripe bucket.

Elspeth said, "I must leave you, Mr Haynes. It's Saturday night an' I've a pitman an' his family to cook for."

Haynes stepped to one side. He swept his cap out as if it had a peacock's feather sewn to it, showed all his white teeth in a grin.

Elspeth nodded and went past him and into the shop.

She did not know Georgie Haynes well enough to be other than amused by the incident.

Mouse was pressed against the inside of the door. She too had seen the keelman. She had her tiny hands pressed tight on Mary Jean's shoulders as if to prevent the child from running out to her mother, from intruding on the romantic interlude, spoiling it.

Mouse licked her lips, then said, "That's – that man's Georgie Haynes, off the *Matchless*."

"He did introduce himself, Mouse. Do you think I'd talk so long to a stranger?"

Taking Mary Jean by the hand Elspeth led the girls into the crowded interior of the shop.

Mouse plucked at her skirt. "He's wicked, is Georgie Haynes."

"Well, I do not intend to have anythin' more to do with him, Mousie, so you can stop frettin' on that score," said Elspeth, and distracted Mouse and Mary Jean by directing them to the sweetmeat stall where, in bowls and on trays, all sorts of sugary delicacies were displayed.

It took Elspeth an hour to make all her purchases. She found all three girls at the trinket counter. They were chattering excitedly, anxious for Elspeth to admire their buys. Mouse had selected a ring, a cheap tin thing with a painted diamond at its centre, while Sarah had spent her money on a tin hair-clasp and a foot of mock-silk ribbon. Being not much interested in geegaws, Mary Jean had settled for edibles and was coated with cinnamon paste, almond crumbs and the sticky dust of a sherbet.

With the girls about her, Elspeth set off across the square, lugging her heavy basket of provisions. She had put Georgie Haynes out of mind and was in good humour, when, emerging from the end of the lane, she saw that the keelman had stationed himself at the bridge.

He leaned against the post, arms folded.

Spotting him too, Mouse reached at once for Sarah and Mary Jean and drew them against her as if Haynes was an abductor of young children and might bag them on to his boat to sell as slaves in the city. Even Mary Jean seemed to sense the threat of the man. She pressed herself against Mouse without a word.

Once more Georgie Haynes did a bit of swank with his cap.

"Well now, Mistress Patterson, is this no' an astonishin' coincidence?"

"That," said Elspeth, stiffly, "is a matter of opinion."

Indolently Georgie stretched one leg across the width of the little bridge.

"I'll carry your basket, if ye ask me nice," he said.

"I can manage perfectly well, thank ye."

"I'd prefer it," said Haynes, "if ye'd let me carry you."

Elspeth had had enough of the keelman's sauce.

"Stand out of my way."

She imagined that the keelman, for all his arrogance, had reached the limit of boldness. He would not dare assault her, not sober, and not with the Grapes only three hundred yards away down the Placket road. The colliers would skin him if he touched one of their women against her will.

"I would prefer it," said Haynes, "if you'd stand in my way. Could we not stand t'gether for a while?"

The implications would not be lost on Mouse; even Sarah had heard enough of such talk to understand what Haynes meant by it.

Angrily, Elspeth said, "Will you, sir, let me pass?"

"Do ye hear that?" Haynes cried, to nobody in particular. "She calls me 'sir'. I'll tell you what, Mistress Patterson, if you gi' me a kiss I'll lift my leg."

To Elspeth's astonishment the keelman did not await an answer. He caught her arm and endeavoured to snake his arm about her waist. The basketful of provisions fended him off but he had effectively separated her from the girls and trapped her on the narrow span of the bridge.

"Mouse," Elspeth shouted, "go an' fetch your father."

Mouse drew back, shaking her head. It was left to Sarah to act.

Hardly had the words left Elspeth's mouth than the younger girl was in motion. She ran straight for the edge of the winter-shorn gully and leapt down into it, out of sight. The burn below was shallow enough to allow her to wade across it, though, Elspeth suspected, Sarah might keep to the gully, sheltered by it, until the slope eased and she could emerge not far behind the Bunch of Grapes.

Haynes did not back away. He hardly seemed to be aware that somebody had gone for assistance, or did not care.

His tone was unctuous. "I'll do ye no harm, woman. I want but a kiss, a token that there'll be frien'ship between us in the future."

Elspeth could hear Mary Jean whimpering. She was reluctant to discard the basket in case the provisions were lost. She took her eye from the keelman and glanced downstream into the gloom to see if she could make out Sarah.

Haynes dragged her closer.

Fearing that he might dislocate her arm, Elspeth yielded.

In horror Mouse watched, uncertain now that Elspeth appeared to have given herself to the man and endured the man's rough hands upon her without protest.

"Come below the bridge wi' me," Haynes whispered, "an' you'll discover I'm twice the man your coal-hewer is."

Revolted, Elspeth could no longer contain herself.

She raked Haynes' cheek with her fingernails, drawing blood.

The basket slid from her elbow and spilled its contents upon the ground. Haynes, who did not seem at all daunted by her fire, dragged her forcibly against him. She spat into his face, shocked at herself for doing it.

"By Christ, you're a wildcat!" Haynes said, laughing. "I like a woman wi' spunk. Come now, the kiss an' I'll let ye go."

Perhaps he would have released her there and then. Even Georgie Haynes was not so insensitive as to believe that he had won her heart by such a bullying declaration of love. He could not lose face, however. He continued to hold her on the off chance that she would give him a sign that favoured his conceit. In a minute or so he would have released her with a laugh and a promise of another meeting.

Sarah, however, who had emerged from the gully not far off, had encountered her brother. Having consumed two stoups of ale to celebrate his rise in the world of men, Davy was toddling up towards the village to bring the news to his sisters. Davy was drunk enough to be fearless. He came charging to Elspeth's rescue, armed with a wooden stave torn from a broken fence.

With a man less dangerous than Georgie Haynes the scene might have been comic but Georgie was too slow, did not release Elspeth at once and thus avoid his attacker.

Davy swung the stave low and chopped the keelman across the back of the calves with it. Haynes roared in pain. Davy was no more sensible than the keelman, however, and came in again at once, swinging the stick like a sickle.

Haynes thrust Elspeth from him. With a quick snapping motion, he clasped Davy Bennet by the nape of the neck and the seat of his breeks and hoisted him from the ground. The stave swiped and swished ineffectually as Georgie Haynes held the boy out at arm's length.

Mouse had at last found her voice.

Her shrieks brought womenfolk scampering down the lane from the square. Sobbing, Mary Jean clung to Mouse's skirts while Elspeth beat her fist on the keelman's broad back and shouted, "Put him down, damn you. He's nothin' but a child."

Haynes laughed. He took a pace away from Elspeth and held Davy, kicking and flailing, over the edge of the parapet, twenty or thirty feet above the stones of the burn. Elspeth realised at once that Davy was in great danger. The keelman had no sense. If he let Davy go the boy would surely suffer broken bones and might even be killed by a blow to the head on the stones below. She did not dare strike Haynes again.

Georgie had his audience now. He was playing up to the women and girls who congregated at the bridge and who thought that the incident was fun, a joke that Georgie had contrived for their amusement.

"Come then, pretty lass, gi'e me my kiss in exchange for this fightin' scrap," the keelman said. "That's my price, your sweet red lips on mine."

The collier girls thought this a marvellous stroke and set up a chatter of delight, whistling, catcalling, applauding, all on the side of the keelman, all for the bold Georgie. At that instant Elspeth hated them for their coarseness and ignorance. Davy had become conscious of danger. He held himself still, hanging limp from the man's fists, though he continued to utter cries of impotent frustration.

"Hurry," Georgie Haynes said. "I'm gettin' tired."

Elspeth put a hand upon the keelman's shoulder and touched her mouth to his.

The women cheered and jeered; Georgie was a hero.

"Nah, lass," Haynes said. "I'll not take short measure. It's a proper stinger I'm wantin'."

Elspeth stiffened, braced herself, pressed her lips against his ready mouth. She felt his tongue, thick and curled, probe and penetrate her lips, and tore herself from him in disgust.

Georgie grinned. "You'll no' be so bloody shy next time, m' love."

"Put him down."

"Take him. He's no' worth drownin'."

As if heaving a shovelful of coal from a deck, Haynes swung from the waist and unclasped his fists, dumping Davy on to the bridge. He administered a tap with the toe of his boot and Davy, humiliated, rolled and rose and ran away across the Placket road to hide in the foreshore grasses.

The onlookers applauded. Georgie threw back his head, stuck his hands to his hips and laughed and laughed as if the whole episode had been a show put on for entertainment. But when he turned his face to Elspeth she saw no levity at all but deadly, burning seriousness.

"I'll have you 'neath me yet, lady," he murmured, then turned, raising his arms and, bowing to the watching women, cried, "Wha's next?"

"Me, Georgie. Me."

Sarah, like Davy, had vanished. Elspeth called Mouse and Mary Jean to her, while the fatuous, bullying keelman paraded for the girls.

Hastily she gathered the provisions, those that had not spoiled in the mud, flung them into the basket, then, chasing Mouse and her daughter before her, hurried away from the bridge and the keelman's triumph, sick with loathing.

It seemed that it was not just men from her past that Elspeth had to fear but this threatening bully who had entered her life without invitation or request.

She hurried on, holding the basket on one arm and Mary Jean's hand in her own.

They had gone a good quarter-mile down the road to the cottages before Mouse opened her mouth.

"Why did ye do it?" she demanded, furiously.

Elspeth was taken aback.

"Do what?"

"Kiss him like yon?"

Mouse was accusing her, berating her. She could hardly believe that the girl-child was so unobservant.

"You – you saw how it was, Mousie. I – I had to. For Davy's sake."

"He meant Davy no harm."

"Mouse, how can you –"

"You *wanted* t' kiss him. You *wanted* t' match wi' him."

"Mouse, that's enough!"

Mouse, weeping, took to her heels and ran towards the lights of the cottage rows.

Elspeth did not call after her and did not pursue. She had troubles enough of her own without having to contend with Mouse's silly misinterpretations.

Later she was to regret that she had not paid Mouse more attention in that agitated hour, had failed to detect in the tears and the rantings the first twisted stirrings of sexual jealousy.

The road that had led Keir Bolderon to Hanover Street and to – almost – nocturnal meetings with Olivia Melrose had been one full of strange meanderings, though how strange Mr Bolderon had no notion at the time.

Five years ago, when Bolderon had been seeking investors to support his venture into pit management, McNeil had put him in touch with a Perthshire gentleman by the name of Stuart Melrose. Melrose, it seemed, was interested in wetting his feet in mineral investment and, by putting up a modest piece of capital, had become Keir Bolderon's sleeping partner. Mr Melrose had even hinted that he might be disposed to do more for the upstart manager – being a bit of an upstart himself. Alas, Mr Melrose had been cut down by typhus in the mid-summer of 1812 and had taken his only daughter and younger son to the grave with him. After a prolonged period of silence and uncertainty Keir Bolderon had found himself in dealings with the widow.

Olivia Melrose, as it transpired, was not at all difficult to deal with. She made it clear at the outset that she wished to continue her husband's investment in the Abbeyfield and had no intention of withdrawing capital from the venture, as she was legally entitled to do.

Why should she? The lump sum brought in handsome dividends, and the lady saw no reason to disturb the arrangement. She requested, however, an occasional informal report on the Abbeyfield's progress since she did not understand matters of business as well as a man would do.

Keir Bolderon was vastly relieved at being relieved of the onerous burden of finding four hundred pounds with which to pay off the widow. He agreed instantly that informal reports would be regularly forthcoming. At Mrs Melrose's request a meeting was arranged between the pit manager and the widow lady.

Olivia Melrose turned out to be a woman of character. She had married rather late and was now, Bolderon reckoned, in her thirty-eighth or-ninth year. She was dark-haired, plump and tall. An astringent sense of humour lessened her severity and she spoke with just the trace of a dialect which made her seem more down-to-earth than some glass-tongued Edinburgh matrons. Keir Bolderon soon shed his inhibitions and began to enjoy their 'secret' meetings, two or three times in the year, in Mrs Melrose's town house in Hanover Street.

In spite of the fact that conversation flowed thick and fast and that Mrs Melrose was by no means guarded or aloof, Bolderon learned very little about the lady's personal history. He did not know, for example, that she had not been baptised with the name Olivia but had chosen it for herself at a point in her life when she had grown sick and tired of slaving for her brother and had set out, deliberately, to find herself a husband.

Name-changing was but a small affectation. It in no way detracted from the able determination with which the woman had helped her husband to rise in the world, to acquire, in short order, more than his share of property, stock and wealth.

Stuart Melrose's transformation to 'gentleman' was almost complete when typhus took his soul, and Mrs Melrose had no intention of letting that struggle be wasted.

Mr Bolderon would not have dreamed of 'dropping in' on Mrs Melrose. The supper-takings, arranged by letter at the lady's instigation, were discreet and decorous. Mr Bolderon might be alone in the dining-room with Olivia Melrose but he was not alone in the house. Although the widow claimed that she travelled 'light' for her Edinburgh sojourns the entourage seemed 'heavy' to Mr Bolderon. In addition to her son, Stuart, Mrs Melrose brought with her from Perthshire a housekeeper and companion, a maid and her son's tutor, Mr Hardy. The Hanover Street residence had a permanent staff of three. Mrs Melrose's reputation was, therefore, protected by no fewer than seven loyal servants and the slightest squeak from Madam would have brought them running to defend her honour.

Mr Bolderon, of course, had no intention of challenging the lady's honour. Inclination was another matter. On that Saturday in March, in particular, he had Neil McNeil's injunction very much in mind and the dark-haired and sophisticated widow had never seemed more desirable. Keir Bolderon had always had a penchant for women of full constitution and Mrs Melrose was not in the least timid and countrified about showing off just how full her constitution was. That night she wore a clinging Grecian sort of thing trimmed of all frills that might distract attention from her figure and, after the customary excellent supper of meats and fishes washed down with best imported wines, Mr Bolderon's blood, if not exactly boiling, was certainly on the simmer.

Keir Bolderon had never been a Philistine in matters of art and literature. He had kept abreast of the doings of the capital, the backbiting and bickering that passed for culture in New Edinburgh's incestuous society. Mrs Melrose, though she professed to take none of it seriously, was well up in the latest gossip about her famous neighbours, judges, advocates, ministers of the Gospel, and had even acquired a few confidential titbits about Mr Scott, the novelist, who resided nearby in Castle Street.

While Mr Bolderon simmered gently, Mrs Melrose talked.

"Have you perused the most recent issue of *Blackwood's Magazine*?" the lady enquired.

"Indeed, I have."

"What opinion did you form of its contents?"

"It seems to me," said Mr Bolderon, "that *Blackwood's* has already become a formidable influence, albeit the contributors are impudent tomahawkers intent in the main on chopping up the reputations of better men than they are."

"How well expressed. Do you object to that sort of sport, Mr Bolderon?"

"Good Lord, no! Nothin' I like better than to see a puffed-up reputation punctured."

"How refreshingly honest of you to admit it."

"Gauche, perhaps . . ."

"Oh, no," Mrs Melrose assured her visitor. "Most people, even those who proclaim themselves models of virtue, take a malicious pleasure in seein' the high and the mighty brought down."

"Provided," said Keir Bolderon, "that it's done artistically."

Mrs Melrose laughed.

Her bosom shivered visibly in the neck of her dress, causing Mr Bolderon to swallow, unchewed, a fragment of smoked pheasant. Quickly he reached for his wine glass.

In the past he had not been immune to Olivia Melrose's charms but his conversation with McNeil had, as it were, thrown everything into high relief.

"How witty you are, Mr Bolderon."

Keir Bolderon blushed. He protested that he was naught but a simple engineer. Mrs Melrose would have none of such modesty. For five delectable minutes she tried to convince him that he was a fellow of taste and discernment.

Literary discourse continued until supper was finished and the couple repaired to the parlour where Mr Bolderon, following the usual procedure, prepared to buckle down to business; trouble was, he was no longer sure what business he should buckle down to. The moment that the venerable McNeil had uttered the fateful words, "Marry it", a vision of Olivia Melrose, shimmering in candlelight, had popped into Keir Bolderon's head. Now that the vision was before him, very much in the flesh, he found that his intention was divided. He did not know how to behave, how to protect his reputation as a perfect gentleman – and still plead for money for the Abbeyfield.

Gathering his wits, he tried to ignore the sibilant sounds of Olivia's skirts as she seated herself on the divan by the fire, to blot out her silhouette, to revive images of the Abbeyfield's reeking coal piles and straining horses. He must not, he admonished himself sternly, merge money and matrimony too hastily.

Thrown off stride, Mr Bolderon's explanation of his relationship with Hector Fotheringham became long-winded and tendentious. He stammered a little, stuttered a lot, and paced distractedly on the square of carpet before the hearth.

Mrs Melrose sat calmly by the fire twirling a glass of claret in her fingers and regarding him as if he was a model of lucidity and not a tongue-tied fool.

At length, however, she felt impelled to put him out of his misery. "Mr Bolderon, what is it that you are tryin' to say?"

"Simply put, that I require several hundred pounds to explore the Abbeyfield."

"Are you askin' me to give you several hundred pounds?"

"Apart from paying for boring, the pit needs new sinks, a replacement wagonway to the ladings, a proper pumping-engine, and—"

"I accept that drawin' coal is expensive," Mrs Melrose intervened. "Tell me, however, what you offer in return."

"Five per cent."

"No share, only an unstable investment?"

"I – I—"

"How much do you require?"

"Five hundred pounds."

"For one thousand pounds, Mr Bolderon, I might buy into a company."

"What company?"

"I hear that Mr Mowbray has leased ground near Alloa and is actively searchin' for partners."

"At what guarantee?"

"At five per cent."

"Mowbray," said Keir Bolderon, "is developing new winnings. I think you'll find, dear Mrs Melrose, that the resolution of co-partnership includes provision for a sinking-fund. If the development is mismanaged you might well be pitchin' good money after bad."

"Is the Abbeyfield better managed?"

"I would not prejudice myself by saying otherwise," said Keir Bolderon. "May I point out, with due respect, that it's done fairly well by you over the years."

"I'll grant you that, Mr Bolderon. But, you see, I have no contract with the landowner, with Mr Fotheringham."

"That was how your late and lamented husband wished it."

"It was a suitable arrangement at the time," said Mrs Melrose. "The situation has changed, however. If you are discharged by Mr Fotheringham at the termination of the present lease, my capital will leave with you, will it not?"

"If I discover new coal—"

"Good money after bad, Mr Bolderon?"

Keir Bolderon did not answer. He sighed and seated himself wearily on a little tub chair. He had been through the rigmarole too often of late. He was tired of it, almost bored by it. McNeil was absolutely right. Any man who wished to make his way upward in commerce should be free from the trivialities of business, from having to balance a penny on a shilling and both on the point of his nose.

Marriage, marriage to a woman as rich as Mrs Melrose was indeed the solution. For one fleeting moment Keir Bolderon was tempted to sink to his knees there and then, take her plump hand in his and propose an immediate engagement. But courtship was unbroken ground. He flinched from it. He did not know what it meant to be in love, or how to feign the condition. He doubted if what he felt for Olivia Melrose was honest enough to stand upon for thirty or forty years.

"Well," he said, lamely. "Well, I have put my case, Mrs Melrose, and I will leave it with you." Using a trick he had learned from Fotheringham, he dug into his vest pocket and ostentatiously consulted his watch. "Ah, I see it's late. I must be on my way."

"So soon, Mr Bolderon?"

Keir Bolderon got to his feet.

The woman, too, rose. She put her glass upon a side-table. She was taller than Bolderon by an inch or so and her height seemed to add refinement.

"Am I – am I not to be persuaded?" she said, softly.

"I believe, dear Mrs Melrose, that I have made my position plain. I suggest that you ponder upon it or consult your advisers, if you wish."

She touched his arm. He sensed either sympathy or pity; he could not be sure which. God, if he could not separate such ordinary emotions how could he hope to cope with more abiding ones like love?

"Are you insulted by my caution, Mr Bolderon?"

"Not at all, madam," said Mr Bolderon. "But I confess that I cannot compete against men like Robert Mowbray. You see, I came from nothing. I stand on my own feet by what I've gained through honest industry. I've much more to lose than a Mowbray or a Fotheringham."

"I understand."

"I doubt if you do, Mrs Melrose. We were born into different worlds, you and I."

Olivia Melrose did not seem dismayed by his outburst. Instead she gave a soft little laugh and shook her head.

"Silly man," she said, "to be so easily deceived by appearances."

She kissed him upon the cheek and, before he could recover from his surprise, rang the bell for Scobie to fetch Mr Bolderon's hat and topcoat and to escort him down the ill-lit staircase and out into the street.

Davy's anger had soured into a black sulk by the time he crept home from hiding in the grasses of the foreshore. The beer he had consumed had curdled in his stomach and he was ill and wretched as well as humiliated. Elspeth, ignoring his temper, forced him to drink a spoonful of the mixture that his father used to offset the effects of alcohol and more or less ordered him to bed. Without a word to anyone the boy crawled into his blankets and cowled them over his head.

Mouse too had hidden herself in bed, burrowed away under the dresser, her head under the straw bolster. She would not come out, would not converse, and kicked away the bowl of hot gruel that Sarah brought her.

Elspeth would have preferred to follow the trend and take herself immediately to bed too but there were chores to be done and she did not feel it right to leave them all to poor Sarah. Together the woman and girl prepared vegetables and meat for the Sunday stew. Mutton-fat and flour were creamed into a thickening and added to the pot. The fire was carefully banked to maintain its heat so that the big iron pot would simmer gently throughout the night. Soon the aroma of stew stole into the air. Elspeth was comforted by its familiarity. The keelman would not bother her here, would not cross the plank bridge of the Rutherford burn, protected by its row of cottages. In Jock Bennet's cottage she was safe from the outside world.

Mary Jean was fractious. She protested when Mammy made her ready for bed, squealed at the face-wash that Mammy inflicted, wailed when Mammy carried her outside to use the earth closet in preference to her little baby pot in the corner. She settled down, however, when she was laid in Mammy's bed and, thumb in mouth, dropped off to sleep almost at once.

When Elspeth returned to the hearth after attending to her daughter she found that Sarah too had taken herself to bed without a word of goodnight. Elspeth sighed. The children should not have been subjected to the sight of the keelman's callous actions and she felt her loathing of the man increase.

Elspeth changed into a flannel shift, washed herself and brushed her hair before she snuggled under the clothes by Mary Jean's side. Tonight she would not transfer the child to the wooden cot, for she needed to feel her daughter by her. Mary Jean champed on her thumb, rolled against her mother's body but did not waken.

It was still outside. The wind had died away and the trees were motionless. From the fieldgate came the sound of men's voices. A dog barked in the distance. The fire glow painted the curtain a lovely red and the stewpot gave an occasional croak as it released its savoury steam. Tension in Elspeth slackened. She felt heavy and drowsy. She would waken, perhaps, when Jock Bennet came home from the Grapes for she did not sleep dead away like most colliers but lightly, listeningly, like a shepherd or a drover. She closed her eyes, folded her arms to her breast as if she must crawl into sleep through a tunnel. And then the whole cottage shook.

The door burst open, slamming on its hinges. Jock Bennet barged through it and crashed into the table. Crocks smashed on the floor.

Elspeth sat up.

The collier's shadow loomed on the curtain.

"What's wrong?" Elspeth cried.

Jock Bennet tore the curtain from its string and flung it behind him. He reached down unerringly, snarled Elspeth's hair in his fists and hoisted her on to her knees.

Mary Jean wakened and howled.

Elspeth had enough sense not to resist. Jock Bennet could be ugly when he had drunk too much, though usually he kept his fists to himself and struck nobody except Davy.

"What –"

"I heard about you," he shouted. *"I heard how ye were matchin' wil' a bloody river tink."*

Elspeth opened her mouth to protest but the breath was taken from her as the pitman yanked her to her feet.

Mouse, Sarah and Davy were all awake, sitting up in their beds. Mouse held the bolster before her like a shield, and Davy squirmed on to his knees ready to leap to safety lest his father's wrath turn, as it so often did, against him.

Elspeth clutched the miner's forearms. Corded muscles slid against the bones. Somewhere along the road he had discarded his jacket and was bare-armed, bare-chested, icy cold. The reek of whisky was sharp on his breath as he roared into her face, *"D'you want another bairn stuck in your belly, eh? Is one bastard no' enough?"*

In spite of his strength and the violence of his mood, Elspeth did not fear Jock Bennet as she feared the menace of the keelman. She had an understanding of the pressures that had formed him, his prejudices, his pain.

Jock Bennet had lost two wives and had never admitted to a living soul how much he had needed them, how much he had relied on them and how much their deaths had scarred him. He could not bring himself to match again for fear of more pain, pain that he could not bear. It was for this reason that he did not desire Elspeth Patterson, however much he might pretend to his work-fellows that he took his pleasure with her whenever he fancied. In Jock Bennet's book women were never innocent, but brought to a man the kind of hurts that could not be bound and healed.

"If you canna content yoursel' wi'out a man, find a decent collier for your bed, not a bloody river tink. We match only wi' our own kind, lady. Do ye hear me?"

Suddenly Elspeth realised that she had betrayed not only Jock Bennet but the community too. Those men who had cast longing glances in her direction had turned on Jock as if he was her legal-wed husband and she had deceived him in broad daylight with Georgie Haynes. With that realisation came an instinctive knowledge of how she must react to the unjust charge.

She shouted back.

She had no notion of precisely what she said; it was the garbled language of retaliation, not a defence.

Bennet let go of her hair and, catching her by the shoulder, dragged her from the protection of the corner.

Elspeth went on shouting.

She shouted, shouted, shouted until Jock Bennet slapped her to make her cease.

The blow stung, spread heat like a scald across her cheeks. She wiped her mouth, tasting blood, then, sucking a deep breath, began to shout at him once more.

Jock Bennet surrendered. He had had enough.

Haughtily, if unsteadily, he retreated towards the hearth, turning his back on Elspeth. The storm had blown itself out. He had asserted his authority, had made his point, had bawled loudly enough to be heard half-way to Placket, had told the community who was master. Mumbling, he rested, one hand braced on the chimney-face. Mouse and Davy were both alert, ready to rescue him if he should sway and fall towards the fire. If he burned himself he would not be able to hew coal come Monday morning, and that would be a tragedy to end all tragedies.

Elspeth dabbed her bruised lip with the back of her hand, silent at last. She glowered at the pitman. His small, sweating head was made bloody by the firelight. His eyes had gone dull now that he had discharged his duty. The fumes of all the whisky he had consumed were taking effect.

He went, grumbling, outside, relieved himself by the door and, grumbling, returned.

Mouse, Davy and Sarah had sunk down into their bedclothes once more and Elspeth had picked up Mary Jean to soothe her. She carried the child in her arms, pacing softly, but when she spoke directly to Jock Bennet her voice still contained a strident note.

"Do you want your supper?" she asked him.

"Nah, nah."

Bennet rested his shins against the bottom of his bed. He stared down at the neat brown blanket and the brown bolster.

"Nah, nah, lass. Nothin' for me."

Sluggishly he bent from the waist, rolled forward on to the bed and with a long, shuddering sigh twisted himself on to his back and lay still.

Elspeth continued to walk with Mary Jean, a dainty step, a soothing, crooning dance in the confined spaces of the kitchen which, in due course, coaxed the child down into sleepiness once more, though her little arms clung tight to Mammy and would not let her go.

"Elspeth?" It was Sarah who spoke.

"What?"

"Did he hurt you?"

"No. Now go to sleep, all of you."

She seated herself at the table, still holding Mary Jean, and remained there until the steady rhythm of breathing told her that the Bennets were taking their rest.

She drew a blanket over Jock and only then went back into her corner and, exhausted by the events of the day, lay down to sleep with her daughter in her arms.

At about nine o'clock on that Saturday evening Tolland knocked on the door of the study. He received no reply but, having grown used to working on his own initiative, he entered the darkened room and found his master already in bed. James paid not the slightest attention as the steward raked and coaled the fire and removed the supper dishes. He gave no answer when the steward softly enquired if he required anything for his comfort. Tolland noticed that the brandy bottle was out upon the table, however, and had sunk by a good inch. He could not decide whether it was a good thing or a bad, that his master's taste for spirits had revived. But he took a decanter, filled it with whisky from a keg in the larder and brought it back, wiped decanter, bottle and glass and set them, with an earthenware jug of fresh water, upon the stand on the table and then left again, bidding the motionless figure in the truckle bed a goodnight.

All day Tom Tolland had been unsettled. Rudge's question about Mr Moodie's sanity rattled about in his head. It galled him that he could give no answer. He would decide first one way and then the other, change his mind every half-hour or so. If he had supposed that Mr Moodie's resurrection would be swiftly completed then Tom Tolland was doomed to disappointment. Jamie Moodie had been back in his cell in manacled silence since half-past eleven in the morning. Saturday, however, was not quite over, not for the master of Moss House or his loyal, if bewildered, servant.

Tolland 'dined' with Hazel in the kitchen. The girl had lost her shyness with the steward, which was small wonder considering the intimacy of their situation. But she was nervous that night after her confrontation with the mysterious master, a meeting, Tolland supposed, that must for the lass have been akin to bumping into a ghost. The cook had made a beef pie, however, and Tolland had raided the cellar for a bottle of good wine and he plied Hazel with food and drink and treated her as if she was a lady, fussing over her and serving her with his own hands.

It was warm, even hot, in the kitchen. Young Hazel had reached a glazed state, with bodice unlaced, cheeks and bosom equally flushed and a pearl-like drop of perspiration on her brow. Tom Tolland had unbuttoned his waistcoat and discarded his collar. In three or four minutes Tom intended to invite Hazel to sit on his ample lap and enjoy a petting. He would stroke and fondle her as if she was a placid cat. Ten or twenty minutes thereafter, about midnight, steward and servant-girl would repair to the cubby, and kitchen door and cubby door would be carefully locked. Tom Tolland was looking forward to it with a lazy sensuality and not a shred of guilt; and then he heard the voice, the voice that he had not heard raised in many months, except to rave hollowly from time to time.

There was nothing hollow in the tone now.

"Tolland. Tolland."

"Blast and damn!" Tolland muttered. "Blast and damn!"

Hazel had gone whisking off into the dark cubby where, if Tolland's guess was correct, she would hide not in but under the wooden bedstead. Hastily the steward wiped his fingers, buttoned himself up and draped his jacket across his shoulders.

"TOLLAND."

"Aye, I'm comin'."

He took the candle from the mantel-holder, stuck it into a dish and hastened through the darkened corridor to the door of the study. He did not knock but entered without hesitation, the candle before him.

James Moodie had lighted an oil lamp. He had poked the coals in the grate and made a blaze of them and the room was filled with rufous light. Moodie had also dressed himself, trousers and a shirt, stockings and shoes, and had slung a dressing-robe about his shoulders, though he could hardly have been cold. He did not enquire if Tolland had been abed, did not make apology.

He said, "I canna write, Tom."

Tolland glanced at the table. Paper had been taken from a drawer, a number of sheets, and the inkwell's silver stand too. Two pens, with new nibs attached, and a blotting leaf and a little knife, and even sealing-wax, had all been unearthed and set about as if James Simpson Moodie at that inauspicious hour had been suddenly possessed by the need to begin his memoirs.

"What is it ye wish t' write, Mr Moodie?"

"Letters."

"Are they of a private nature, Mr Moodie?"

"My hand, my fingers."

Tolland glanced now at the decanter and the brandy bottle but they did not appear to have diminished in content. He scratched the back of his neck.

"Would it not do t' write the letters tomorrow, sir, since tomorrow is the Sabbath an' there will be no post for them?"

"I have a cramp, Tom. I canna grip."

To demonstrate the reason for his need of a secretary, James flexed his fingers. It was not his knuckles but his brain that could not find a grip, though, Tom Tolland knew.

"Is it your wish for me t' take down writin', Mr Moodie?"

"Trust you, Tom. Trust you."

Tolland blew out the candle, put the dish on the window-ledge and his jacket on the back of the chair. Bedclothing had been flung aside violently, he noticed, as if the impulse to commit words to paper had come upon Moodie with overwhelming suddenness.

"Verra well, sir, if my poor penmanship will suffice," Tom Tolland said, as he seated himself at the table and adjusted the paper and inspected the pen-nibs to find the better of the two, "I'll gladly record your words."

Out in the hallway the clock struck twelve jangling notes. James did not appear to hear them, though he paused out of habit until the mechanism fell quiet again. In reality Tom Tolland doubted if James Simpson Moodie had the least idea of time. Perhaps he did not even know what day it was or what month of the year.

As if to confirm the steward's suspicions, James said, "Date?"

Patiently and carefully, Tolland wrote the date in numerals on the top right-hand of the blank page.

The pen was small, one of the new-fangled kind, but the nib was smooth and ink flowed well from it. Tolland, however, was more used to a pencil or a chalk. He crouched awkwardly over the work, half turned towards his master so that he could keep an eye on the man, to gauge the sense as well as the sentences that came so haltingly from the weaver's lips.

As in all things now the formulation of words into logical phrases seemed to strain James Simpson Moodie. He who had once been capable of penning a dozen letters in an hour, each different and each concise, groped and fumbled for the simplest construction.

"To – to – Bontine."

"Is the letter t' Mr Randall Bontine or t' Mr Gilbert?" said Tom Tolland.

"One – one to each."

"Shall we be startin' wi' the letter to Mr Gilbert, then?" Tom Tolland suggested. "What is it ye wish to say, Mr Moodie?"

"Here. Bring him here."

"Aye, so ye wish Mr Gilbert Bontine t' call upon you?"

"Yes."

"When, Mr Moodie?"

"Yes."

Writing as he spoke, the steward composed the letter. He, not his master, chose the day, Wednesday, and the time, ten before noon, for the appointment and filled in the courtesies. He had already decided that he would not trust the missive to the post but would despatch Luke McWilliams with it on horseback tomorrow, Sunday or not, and instruct the young man to await a written answer.

Though he had spoken only a word or two, James Moodie watched and nodded as the steward wrote on and on, the script sliding a little unsteadily to the right-hand of the page and the letters becoming narrower as he grew used to the pen.

When it was done, Tolland charged the pen with ink, stood up and guided Moodie to the table and, with his forefinger, showed him where to make his signature.

In a jerky but legible hand, it was done.

Tolland poured a glass of brandy, added a little water, and gave it to his master before beginning the process of extracting from him the substance of the second letter, that to Sir Randall Bontine.

James, however, seemed to have caught the memory, to be connected with his intentions. He sipped brandy, held the glass in both hands and stooped over Tolland's shoulder.

Very rapidly he said, "To Sir Randall Bontine of Ottershaw. My dear sir, havin' need of the services of a gentleman versed in fine points of the law of inheritance, I would be grateful if you would recommend me to—"

Tolland tapped the end of the pen upon his lip.

"Have ye forgotten, Mr Moodie?"

"Yes. Yes."

"The Ottershaw lawyer, the one Mr Randall brought in for the settlements, is that who ye require?"

"His name – gone."

"His name is Angus Hildebrand."

"Yes."

Cautiously, Tom Tolland squinted up at his master. It was, he saw, only the name that had evaded James Moodie and not recollection of the lawyer's worth. He had heard from Hunter what the Dumbarton lawyer had done for Randall, how settlements had been made and deeds expertly interpreted and executed in Randall's favour.

Tolland said, "If I may ask, Mr Moodie, what is it ye require of Mr Hildebrand?"

"My will," James said.

"But you've already draftit a will."

"Altered."

Tolland could not help himself. "In whose favour, Mr Moodie?"

James's eyelids drooped, blanked out his pupils. His mouth closed firm and, for an instant, he looked his old, implacable, unforgiving, conniving self. And, Tom Tolland realised, however dismembered his abilities had been, however disjointed his reason had become there was intelligence enough in old Moodie yet, a protective layer of cunning that would help him keep his secrets to himself.

He put a hand on the steward's shoulder.

"Write. Write my letter, Tolland," James Moodie said.

Thomas Rance clambered on to the beam and walked along it until he was poised over the shaft. From about his body he unfurled a coil of hemp rope and, straddling the beam, knotted the rope to it and let the coil fall, whirring and slapping, away down into the darkness.

Saturday night had merged now with the small hours of Sunday morning and the workings were deserted. In progressive pits there would have been crews below ground and workers here on the surface to give them service but the Abbeyfield was not equipped for a two-shift system and the pit was allowed to breathe easy and undisturbed after the long Saturday haul.

Rance curled the rope under one arm and hitched it about his waist. Cocking his wrists, he cinched it tight, pushed himself into space and lowered himself down the shaft, down and down for a hundred and twenty feet, which was the full length of the rope. There was not a collier on the field who would have done such a trick, not for ten guineas and the promise of a fine funeral. But Thomas Rance had served on inspection gangs in the fiery pits of Ayrshire and had developed many amazing skills which he kept modestly to himself. When he reached the knot at a hundred and ten feet he swung himself from the rope to the shoring on the side of the shaft and clambered down, hand over hand, to the bottom.

Rats squeaked and scuttled away in alarm as Thomas Rance knelt and fumbled with his tinder-box, lit the candle in Elginbrod's lantern and, carrying the light, set off down the road to the ladder that would lead him down, level by level, to the room where Jock Bennet cut coal.

Accompanied by Mr Bolderon, who was by no means afraid of narrow places or of dirtying his hands, Thomas Rance had explored the length of every seam in the miles of tunnels. Tapping with hammers, manager and oversman had listened to the ring of the rock, tapped and listened, listened and tapped. But nothing but aching backs had come from the sorties. Mr Bolderon, however, would not admit defeat. He had offered a bounty of ten pounds to any pitman who broke into a bearing seam of any worthwhile size. So far the bounty had not been claimed.

Even Mr Bolderon admitted that the upper strata of coal-bearing rock had been picked clean over the years and that the small coal deposits that were being scraped from the remaining rooms would last hardly a twelvemonth at the present rate of extraction. He professed to believe that there was coal deep down, along the base tunnels. Here the strata was fragile and subject to slippage but, oddly, the existing tunnels were not unduly wet and lathery and gave up quality great coal in the odd pockets that could be reached by determined hewers like Ogilvie and Bennet.

When he reached the base level Thomas Rance quickly shed his jacket, shirt and undervest. Naked to the waist he tucked the tinder-box, his fob-watch and a bundle of three extra candles into his belt, got down on all fours and peered into the 'broad' tunnel that ribboned away to the diggings. Bennet's air of smugness, though requiring investigation, was partly an excuse. In truth, Thomas Rance enjoyed being in the workings when they were free of bustle and clamour and felt most at home underground.

From the flow of water against the sump he saw that he would need to send down an extra bucket-boy though what had caused the rise in seepage level was a puzzle since there had been no abnormal fall of rain in the hills this past fortnight. The tunnel had been burrowed out of soft rock. It followed the inch-thick, treacle-black splint closely, twisting and changing direction to the dictates of the bearing strata. Twenty feet into the 'broad' tunnel Thomas Rance was obliged to be rid of his trousers and boots, for he had put on weight about the middle since he had given up daily labour with pick, bar and hammer. He belted the candles, watch and box into a pouch made from his handkerchief and knotted it and, pushing the pouch and lantern ahead of him along the rough floor, made headway to Willie Ogilvie's room. Here the seam opened out into a long pocket, slotted behind slabs of sandstone. Only one hewer could work the room in comfort and Ogilvie had drawn claim to it some years ago. He had brought out a remarkable tonnage too, digging carefully back behind the long rock to expose a wedge-shaped coal seam over which, on a Sunday morning not many months since, Mr Bolderon had pored for a good couple of hours in search of the point where the seam might have slipped. But nothing had been found and Rance's experience told him that a year would see this pocket worked out and the base tunnel would have to be abandoned too.

Three rats were in the room. They gnawed happily at tallow splashes that the candles had left. But when Thomas Rance rattled the lantern and made the shadows dance they leapt and scampered away into the narrow tunnel, chittering angrily. Thomas Rance brushed aside their droppings and, arms about his knees, rested. He felt relaxed, at peace. Shepherds might have their meadows, drovers their broad glens and sailors the nfinite vistas of the green, green seas. He preferred the warm damp confines of a coalpit in the off-shift. Here every road had character; and every road was the same. Thomas Rance felt that he knew where he was, below ground. Below ground he felt close to his sons, Peter and Gavin, who had died a dozen years ago, fifteen miles to the west of here in the pit at Slamannan.

If his lads had survived they would have been full-grown colliers with wives and children of their own by now. What a pair of scallywags they had been as youngsters, though. How they had badgered him to let them down to work by his side. Since they were strong, healthy boys for their age, he had willingly accommodated them. Sound lungs and broad backs had not protected them from the slab of burnt dolerite that had slumped, without warning, from the roof. It had been no trumpeted disaster. Only Rance's sons had been crushed. He had pulled them out of the rubble. He had seen their broken bodies winched to the surface and, in due course, he had seen them put back in the ground.

Within a month of the accident Cathy, his wife, had left him. He could not find it in his heart to blame her. She was afraid he would have the youngest lad, Colin, aye, and even the girls down too, would sacrifice them as callously as he had sacrificed the boys. He knew she was right. He could not have prevented it. He was the son of a collier, and they were his children, and the pit was their birthright and their fate.

Cathy had never been lettered and he never heard from her or of her again, not from the day she took her children, his children, and set out to return to her father's croft on the bleak moors north of Inverness, in the far highlands. He thought of her, and of his son and daughters, almost every night, lying alone in his bed in the lodge by the gates of Crove. But he did not think of her as much as he thought of the sons who were dead, of Peter and Gavin, whom he loved now more than he loved anything that lived.

After resting for several minutes Thomas Rance pushed on. He had to get down flat on his belly and make his bones feel thin to run the narrow tunnel out of which Bennet and his women extracted all of each day's haul. Jock Bennet's room was a remote and isolated pocket of dusty coal. Only an ardent collier like Bennet could be expected to work it at all. The air was scant, the heat like noon in August after rain. Thomas Rance felt as if he was being pulverised. He was relieved when the tunnel opened at the room and he could raise his head. He watched cautiously for rats, but there were none, not even under the shelf of the cutting-seam where the floor was splattered with tallow.

He would waste as little time here as possible. It was too uncomfortable a stance for 'mooning'. He left the lantern by the tunnel mouth, lit one of the candles and, creeping forward, examined the surfaces of the coal face, jabbing his fingers into the tightest corners by the roof. He held the flame out to see if it would flutter and show draught, but the room was breathless and the coal petered out into scales of rock without a hint that Jock Bennet had broken through to a thickening seam. Even so, Thomas Rance was puzzled and not quite satisfied.

He hunched himself into a sitting position of sorts and leaned his back against the marl that Bennet had flung out of the room. He scooped up a handful of the stuff and let it leak through his fingers; just plain dirt. In a way he was relieved that he had found no 'secret' catacomb of coal. It would be a job for the devil himself drawing sleds from this depth.

For a moment or two Rance stared past his feet into the tunnel. It was, he thought, like looking into the mouth of a small-bore cannon; and he had to crawl through it again. With a deliberate exhalation of breath he extinguished the candle, returned it to the pouch, flattened himself to the floor and, in that position, wriggled back to the broad tunnel and thence to the ladders and the shaft.

It was close to daybreak when Thomas Rance clambered out of the Abbeyfield. Shaft-structures, stables and outbuildings were beginning to take shape in the darkness. The oversman shivered. He felt isolated and lonely here on top. He turned towards the track that would lead him past the counting-house and on to the road to the lodge at Crove, not far away. Then he stopped, turned, stared back at the rigging.

Where, he wondered suddenly, had the rats gone? He had not seen them after they had chased off down the narrow tunnel; yet from Jock Bennet's room there was no escape, no other exit.

Thomas Rance took a pace back towards the shaft, then, with a shrug, let it go. Rats, after all, were slippery creatures and might have got past him in the dark. He turned and set off, jogging, for home. And Jock Bennet's discovery remained a secret, hidden, for a time, safe below the millstone grit.

FOUR

Deaths and Entrances

In the corner of the Lennox over which the Bontines held sway Mr Angus Hildebrand had become something of a celebrity. He was not a native of the parts and did not make the trail up the Vale of Leven from his house in Dumbarton very often but he had gained a reputation for negotiation and, as it were, the laird's seal of approval.

In the course of much legal and financial wrangling over the will and testament of the late lamented Sir Gilbert Bontine, Angus Hildebrand had first been consulted by Gibbie's wife Alicia and then, for a considerably larger fee, had been employed as a strong right arm in Randall's war against his brother. Since then he had handled many pieces of business for the new laird of Ottershaw and for several other gentlemen in the district as well.

Mr Hildebrand considered himself a master of the laws of Scotland which related to heritage and succession, wills, deeds and the settlement of moveables. His appearances of petition before the courts, and the intricate arguments put there on behalf of clients, were spoken of in awe and had obtained place in many digests and judicial journals. Never, however, had Mr Hildebrand encountered a procedure like that put to him by James Simpson Moodie of Balnesmoor.

Tall and stork-like, Angus Hildebrand had none of the usual flamboyance of advocates. He dressed in rusty black, in a style that was, to say the best of it, provincial, and usually presented himself in a manner that was dry and pedantic. But Angus Hildebrand was shrewd, too shrewd to bring to his meeting with James Moodie any tool, any weapon but clarity. From discreet enquiries here and there, including a long conversation with Sir Randall, Hildebrand had learned something of the background of the half-mad weaver. He had never met the man before, though, and had no notion of how best to approach such an enigmatic person and, being just a lawyer and not a mystic, not even he could knit the whole truth from ragged facts and threadbare rumours.

Angus Hildebrand had gleaned enough information, though, to intrigue him and he entered the library at Moss House on a drizzling afternoon in early April with a certain sense of expectancy. He was keen to meet James Moodie, who had once been so strong and powerful, keen to learn what service it was that Moodie might require of a lawyer.

It being about dinner-time, and the ride from Dumbarton having occupied the best part of the morning, Mr Hildebrand was delighted to partake of the meats and cheeses that had been laid out on a side-table, and to drink a single glass of ale. He was a little less than delighted by the fact that his host did not put in an appearance to share the repast with him and that he was entertained by a servant, even if the servant was the house steward.

In due course, when Angus Hildebrand had eaten his fill, the steward cleared away the dishes and announced that Mr Moodie would join Mr Hildebrand directly, which Mr Moodie did. He came in as the steward went out, and Angus Hildebrand was able to observe the peculiarities of the gait, the almost crippled stoop to Moodie's shoulders. He had not expected this physical malformation, the halting senile walk or the astringency of expression which marked James Moodie's features.

Moodie did not shake the lawyer's hand or offer other greeting. He was not churlish, merely distracted by his own concentration. Hildebrand, who had met all manner of queer fish in his day, had not encountered anyone who disconcerted him quite so much as the Balnesmoor weaver. He was, however, professional, and assumed that it was upon a matter of business that he had been summoned. He let Moodie seat himself behind the long table and then, since he was obviously not going to be invited to do so, took the liberty of finding himself a chair.

Up to this moment he had spoken not a word. He held his tongue, waiting for the client to make the running and dictate the pace.

Moodie licked his lips.

"What can you do for me, Mr – Mr Hildebrand?"

"What do you wish me to do for you, Mr Moodie?"

"My – my will."

"Do you wish me to draft a will for you?"

"New will."

"Do you already have a will in draft, Mr Moodie?"

There was no immediate answer to this question but Mr Hildebrand waited with immaculate patience. He studied the man, his condition, very carefully. He had, he realised, seen similar manifestations in another person once, a master of the Freemasons' lodge in Dumbarton, Boyle by name. Boyle had displayed similar characteristics of illness and had died, as Hildebrand recalled, of a swelling of the fluids of the brain after a bizarre period when he reverted to the gay and carefree behaviour of a child. Not that there was anything childish or childlike about James Moodie.

At length Moodie said, "They'll take it all, my sisters, if you do not protect her."

Hildebrand said, "Ah, you have sisters who may make claim upon your property?"

"After – after I'm dead."

"How many sisters, Mr Moodie?"

"Two."

"Do you not also have a wife and child?"

"It is – it is – that, aye."

"Male relatives?" said Hildebrand.

Moodie shook his head. He pinched his forehead with his fingers as if movement made it ache. He was, however, gathering himself. Hildebrand could see it, see the effort of intellect. Shoulders lifted, breath expanded the broad chest for a moment, and the dull sullen eyes were suddenly upon him.

"My sisters are wealthy," James Moodie said. "They have no need of me an' have neglected me. Mother died, they did not come t' see her decently put to rest. My marriage, they scorned t' acknowledge."

"How long since you met with them?"

"Years, long years. Not years enough."

"Tell me, Mr Moodie, what prevents you making a simple will that leaves all to your wife and daughter? Apart from any legacies you may wish to make – to a favoured servant, say – the court will certainly apportion all residue to a wife and to a surviving child of either sex."

Hildebrand could not be sure that Moodie heard, let alone grasped what he had said. He hoped that he had not made the journey from Dumbarton just to 'swat a little fly', as it were.

"Keep their hands off it," Moodie said.

"Do you mean, sir, your sisters' hands?"

"Aye."

"The Court of Session will—"

"You must protect her."

Hildebrand folded his long legs and sat forward on the chair. "Where is your wife, Mr Moodie, that she cannot defend herself?"

"She'll come – when I'm gone."

"Gone?"

"Dead."

"Is she lost, Mr Moodie?"

"She is lost to me."

"You say that you have a child?"

"I – I do."

"What age is the child?"

"An infant."

"Two or three years old, do you mean?" said Hildebrand.

"Thereabouts."

"Do you not know where your wife and child are to be found?"

"Lost," James Moodie said. "Both lost."

Hildebrand had heard of the handbills, of the frantic and prolonged search that Moodie had instigated across the breadth of Scotland, had heard of the rewards and how the wife had fled from each discovery.

"How long has she been lost?" he asked.

"Years, long years."

"Mr Moodie," Hildebrand snapped, "answer my question."

"Two years."

"Why are you concerned, sir, that your sisters will take your estate, when you are patently both alive and *compos mentis*?" said Hildebrand, with subtle purpose.

"When I'm dead – they'll descend like crows."

"Painful though the question is, Mr Moodie, I must be informed if you have a mortal illness that prompts you to seek my counsel; if the period prior to the will becoming active, as it were, is prescribed."

Moodie shook his head; he did not understand.

Hildebrand said, "Do you know yourself to be dyin', sir?"

To the lawyer's amazement, Moodie laughed. It was a dry rustling sound like a hedgehog stirring in old leaves. Mr Hildebrand prickled with apprehension and the hairs on the nape of his neck lifted slightly.

"You have not given me reply, Mr Moodie."

"Preserve it all for her," Moodie said. "That's what I'm requirin' of you. And of the law."

"Do you mean, Mr Moodie, you wish to protect the realised value of your holdings, including moveable property?"

"I mean – as it – as it is. Intact."

For the moment Mr Hildebrand let that disturbing statement pass. He said, "To your knowledge, your spouse is not deceased?"

James Moodie shook his head.

"Or, to your knowledge, she has not bigamously remarried?"

Again James Moodie shook his head.

"Therefore the lady is your wife in law and the child recorded as your sole heir?"

Hildebrand had fallen into relentless questioning which, in other circumstances, drove sheriffs and opposing solicitors to distraction with its meticulous insistence on detail and definition.

"Aye."

"What is the lady's name?"

"Elspeth Patterson Moodie."

"And the name of the child?"

"Mary Jean. My mother."

"Quite!" said Hildebrand. "Now, Mr Moodie, let me return to your nebulous request that I contrive to 'preserve intact' your property. Exactly what do you mean by that?"

"As – as it is."

"Operating?"

James Moodie nodded.

"Operating as a going concern, the woollen-mill and its attendant enterprises, after you are deceased?" said Hildebrand.

"Aye. As it is now."

"It will be a ship without a rudder, Mr Moodie."

Petulantly, Moodie screwed up his face.

"Preserve intact," he shouted.

Hildebrand stroked his chin thoughtfully, then got to his feet and began to walk forth and back before the table at which the weaver sat. James Moodie did not follow the lawyer with his eyes but – and Hildebrand noted it – he listened with rapt attention. He, Moodie, might have been blind but he was not deaf and the matter of an opinion was crucial to him and drew his disjointed wits together.

"I take it, sir," the lawyer began, "that you wish all to be as it is now. You desire that your wife shall return to this house, intact, to inherit a manufactory that is in profit and milling money, to acquire such capital sum as you may have in deposit – assuming you are not in debt – and to assume responsibility for such other sundries as you have lien over."

"Aye."

"You will require to be drawn up, Mr Moodie, a will and a testament and other documents which will satisfy the court that there is a competent person, or persons, in the charge of operating the concerns, in paying out wages and other accruing debts, et cetera." Hildebrand paused before the table. "The functioning of the court of Chancery is not as it is with our English cousins. The Scottish court is more efficient, more decisive. It will detour special decrees in particular cases back to a sheriff or upward to a Court of Session."

"Can you do it?"

"I cannot, by any legal means, protect the will and testament against challenge by, let us say, your sisters for a period of time without limit; not, that is, if your appointed heirs, wife and child, are not *in situ* or in a position to signal their wish for the disposal of the heritable property, land as well as moveables."

"Can you not do it?"

"By dint of careful drafting of the will and the testament, and by ensuring that you select an executor who will be both trustworthy and entirely sympathetic to your intention, I might be able to preserve your holdings, as you request, for a limited period of time. But that period must be stipulated in your address to the service of heirs."

"How long a period?"

"I would think that two years from the date of your death would be the most that one could hope for. After that time the petitions which your sisters' representatives would draw for waiving of the will and dispersal of the estate *in toto* would carry too much weight. I might defray and delay, by various means, a final decision but, in the interim, the assets would in all likelihood be frozen by court order and the traffic of trade thus brought to a halt."

"She'll come when I'm – gone."

"How will she know?" said Hildebrand.

"Can you do it?"

"I'll need an inventory of all your holdings, Mr Moodie, particularly those related to the holding of land property. If the land held is dispersed across several jurisdictions then it will make the matter more complicated and I might be able to extend that period by some months or years. To hold all in working order, as it were, for much more than two years is beyond my powers, and the powers of any draft."

"She'll come."

Hildebrand leaned his bony hands on the back of the chair. He said, "Will you have listings of all your earning sources and of your capital drawn for me?"

Weaver Moodie pushed himself back from the table and jerked open a drawer in the facing. He extracted from it a thick kidskin wallet and pushed it, with both hands, across the table towards the lawyer.

"It's done," James Moodie said.

Hildebrand lifted the wallet, weighed it in his hand but did not untie the leather strap that held the package of papers together.

"Everything, sir?" he enquired. "Inventories too?"

"My worth," said Moodie.

"On which account, sir, I will, with your sanction, proceed to draw up a series of documents which will entail provision for the return of your heirs to claim the whole estates and holdings within a span of twenty-four months after the date of your death; which, Mr Moodie, may not be yet for many a year."

"She'll come," James said. "I'll bring her back."

"That being the case," said Hildebrand, "she will find all that you desire her to find."

"A place," said James Moodie. "A place for her."

"Two weeks from today, at the same hour, I'll return with the preliminary drafts," said Hildebrand. "If you are not prepared to receive me then I would be most grateful if you would have your steward inform me by letter."

"I'll be prepared," said James Simpson Moodie in a strange, suave murmur that once more made the hairs prickle on the wily old lawyer's neck.

Hiding the newly discovered coal source at the end of the Bennet digging was more easily accomplished than Elspeth would have believed possible.

The Ogilvies showed no interest in what was going on down the narrow tunnel and the shoring and ramping of the new seam, the knocking up of a little wooden door to screen its entrance, was done quietly and quickly, in the course of a single shift, with wood drawn legitimately from the carpenters' shop bolstered by odd planks smuggled to the road-end under sacks on the sleds.

Jock Bennet had no sense of wonder at the existence of the fissure. He regarded it not as a freak of nature but as a gift made by God to His humble servant the coal-hewer. From the outset it was clear that the yield from the new seam would make the Bennets rich by the lights of Abbeyfield colliers. But the gaining of money was an end in itself, distinct and separate from the comforts and opportunities that the money might buy. There would be more meat, more sweetmeats, more trinkets bought, more whisky consumed by the head of the house. In a month or two, when income outstripped expenditure, there would be the purchase of a new jacket, a dress for Sarah, handsome thick-soled boots for Davy, and after that ingenious ways would be found to be rid of the excess cash that flowed into the household purse. Little or none of it would be saved.

The little door, the trap, was hidden by three or four shovels of loose marl and footprints smoored over with a flat blade or slat. Beneath the trap were four short wooden steps up which Davy carried the lumps of coal which Jock clawed down from the face. Davy would manhandle the lumps into the doorway and Mouse or Elspeth would drag them through and load them on to the sleds. The coal was of high quality, all dull and dusty, not bright-black and brittle. It did not have to be cut cleverly but, when the wedges were inserted, slumped down in massive pieces off the face. It was a far cry from hewing chows and the supply of it, Jock Bennet claimed, was endless. Elspeth took the hewer's word on that. She would not set foot beyond the lips of the fissure, would not go through the trap and into the dry seam at any price, though Mouse popped in and out without a qualm.

Circulating the air in the seam was a problem and the trap could not be closed during the shift, though Jock put them all through a drill for sealing the fissure for concealment should anybody venture into the narrow tunnel unbidden.

For two weeks the Bennets and Elspeth cut and hauled the booty from the new seam; and discovered another problem in so doing.

"Bennet. One hundred an' eighteen shillin's."

Paying staff and other hewers in the counting-house were stunned.

"How much, Henning?" said Snippets Smith, though he had made and checked the calculation personally.

"One hundred an' eighteen shillin's."

The hewers muttered in disbelief.

"Your lad, Davy, must be a cutter wi'out equal," said Thomas Rance, rocking on his heels on the box behind the table.

"It is, I believe," Snippets announced, "the highest take from this pit since Mr Bolderon became our manager."

"I'll take bankers' notes, Mr Smith," Jock Bennet said.

Within an hour it was all over the Abbeyfield.

Over a hundred shillings had been dug and hauled by the Bennet family. Even young colliers, working back to back, could hardly bring down so much. By what means and method, folk wondered, had Jock Bennet utilised the services of his puny son to sail the take so high?

"How many hours did he work?"

"Sixty-two hours, like the rest o' us."

"God in Heaven! Ten like Bennet an' Mr Bolderon could pay off the levellers."

Behind the locked door of the counting-house Snippets asked Thomas Rance for a logical explanation.

"Was it the boy, just the boy?"

"It would seem so," Thomas Rance answered.

"But the coal pocket, I thought it was narrow?"

"Aye, it is."

"How did it bear so much?"

"It's deep enough," said Thomas Rance. "But if he cuts down so much extra in the week, it'll not last long."

"What of the coal?"

"Best quality."

Snippets Smith paused. "Is it possible, Mr Rance, that Bennet has found a run to the splint?"

"Possible," said Thomas Rance. "But I have been down and examined the room. There's no evidence of a swelling to the splint."

"What do you think?"

"I think he must have put his back into it."

"Did you weigh his baskets?"

"Elginbrod did not inform me that we were bein' treated to such a demonstration," said Thomas Rance. "But I'll be watchin' the baskets this fortnight, I assure you, Mr Smith."

"What of the haulers, the women?"

"What of them?"

"How in God's name did they carry out so many extra hundredweights?"

"If the coal is cut, it's hauled," said Thomas Rance, with a shrug. "The man sees that it's done."

"Such rogue labour must take its toll."

"It does," said Rance.

Snippets Smith said, "Mr Bolderon should be informed."

"I'll tell him personally tonight."

Keir Bolderon was just as astonished by the increase in Bennet's tally as everyone else; and just as inquisitive.

"Have we ever had such a take, Thomas?" he asked.

"Once or twice," said Thomas Rance. "But years ago, when the third level was first opened, and only for a month or two."

"Was Jock Bennet involved in these prodigious hauls?"

"No. Younger men."

"But the base level is very narrow, as I recall, and sparse."

"Aye, Mr Bolderon. In my opinion it's most like to be freak coal. In all probability he's struck a 'back' to the thin seam and needs the boy, puny though he is, to reach into it."

"But does it look like 'back' coal?"

"From what I've seen, no," Thomas Rance admitted.

"Do you think we should both kit up and venture down to Bennet's room for an inspection?"

"Bennet would resent it, Mr Bolderon."

"Oh, I don't give a damn about that. Should we, Thomas?"

"No, Mr Bolderon. Let's hold off till we see what Bennet comes up with durin' the course of the next fortnight. If he hauls out much over a hundred, we'll tumble in on him and take him by surprise."

"Sound idea, Thomas," Keir Bolderon agreed.

If Jock Bennet was concerned by the reaction to his mammoth earning, he gave no sign of it. He was, perhaps, a little put out by the fact that he received few pats on the back or shakes of the hand for his feat and that, by earning quite so much more than his companions underground, he caused a certain degree of indignation and envy among them. He said nothing of the pay-night's events to Elspeth but she learned enough from Davy to give her pause for reflection.

She waited until Sunday, until Mr Bennet was fed, rested and sober. The children were all out of doors, playing in pallid April sunlight.

"How many times before," Elspeth asked, "have you drawn in a hundred shillings?"

"In the Abbeyfield – twice."

"But it's rare," said Elspeth, "is it not?"

"It'll not be rare from this time forward, I promise."

"Mr Rance'll come down; you must know that."

"Let him come. We'll hide the seam, like we practised."

"If he comes with a rod an' bar an' starts pokin', he'll find the trap without bother," said Elspeth.

"If he does, he does."

"Mr Bolderon'll be furious with you for keepin' the find to yourself. Perhaps he'll even march you off the Abbeyfield."

Jock Bennet laughed. "Bolderon'll not pay off a miner who can find new coal for him. Anyhow, he'll be needin' me to work the bloody seam for him."

"It's invitin' trouble," Elspeth said.

"What is?"

"Drawin' such a high wage."

"No regulation says a man canna earn—"

"Use your head," Elspeth urged.

"Rance'll think it's Davy made the difference."

"Full thirty shillin's difference?"

"Aye, I see what you mean," Mr Bennet admitted.

"Davy might be expected to increase our haul by twelve or fourteen shillin's, but not *thirty*."

Jock Bennet was not stupid, but he was stubborn.

He said, "We'll just have t' brazen it out."

"We could work less hard for a reasonable take," Elspeth suggested.

"So that's it, lady. You want a slack an' idle time o' it?"

"Slack an' idle! I work as hard as any," Elspeth retorted. "But if you want to keep that seam hidden, you'll need to guard it with more than a wooden door. In any case, what do you need with so much extra cash?"

"I need it for protection."

"Protection?"

"I could be breakin' a leg tomorrow, could I not? Where would you all be then? Wi' money saltit away, that fear vanishes." The collier glanced at the young woman, then reluctantly continued. "It happened once before, a while ago. I fell sick wi' a terrible flux. For the life o' me I couldna cut coal. I couldna stand on my pins unaided, let alone go down the shaft. I had three children an' a wife dependin' on me."

"How long were you laid in bed?"

"A month. Three weeks more when I could but stagger. She, my wife, she'd nobody t' haul for, so she went on harness, drawin' a wagon. It's no job for a woman in her sixth month.

Heavy, heavy labour in the harness. When it came her time she was ill-delivered an' left this world, aye, an' the wee bairn wi' her. There was no help for it. It was bring in a wage or starve for the lot o' us. You know nothin' o' life's hardships, lady, or you'd not bait me wi' questions about money."

Elspeth suspected that Jock Bennet had not told her the whole, unvarnished truth. He would have had his wife hauling for him until the last possible moment in her pregnancy. There were women below ground now who were within a day of delivery.

Besides, every man in every community genuinely believed that he had a lease on hardship and suffering. Many a time Elspeth had listened to men who were wealthy enough to buy the Abbeyfield complain bitterly about 'poverty'. On the road she had met folk who lived in the stark shadow of penury, folk to whom the loss of one day's wage might spell the beginning of a spiral of debt that would lead to the loss of family and dignity, to the poorhouse, the charity ward or the horror of a pauper's grave.

In Balnesmoor there had been want and suffering too but the community had managed, somehow, to protect itself against the savage indifference that she had found in towns and cities and in those places where laird had given way to manager, workshop had replaced croft. She was sure that Jock Bennet was not moved by concern for his family's future. For men like him the future was measured shift by shift, basket by basket, and a man's pride was the price of his sweat, counted out in silver into his hand. Yet she was part of this world, this system, and could not ignore the changes that had occurred in her as her will had gradually shaped to the community's ends and her selfishness had thickened like a muscle.

"How long's this seam?" she asked.

"What I can see extends east for sixty feet, at the height o' my head."

"What lies at the nether end?"

"Boulder clay."

"Boulder clay? So deep?"

"It'll be a plug. More coal'll lie beyond it."

"How long will it take you an' Davy to cut it all?"

"Months, years."

"So there's enough."

"Aye, but enough's not so much, lady," Jock Bennet said, without explanation of what he meant by the statement.

"Have you thought of what will happen to us if Mr Bolderon or Mr Fotheringham find no new coal elsewhere an' the Abbeyfield is closed for want of sufficient profit?"

"It'll never happen."

"It might. There have been pits here closed before, have there not?"

"Preston Island was too wet."

"I've heard Mr Rance declare that the Abbeyfield's finished."

"Rance!" said Jock Bennet disparagingly.

"Save your strength, Mr Bennet. Let's take what the seam offers piece by piece. If it's as long as you say then we can cut an' haul a good wage without grindin' ourselves to skin an' bone doin' it," said Elspeth. "An' nobody will suspect because of a silly wage every other Saturday."

"There's some sense in what you say," Jock Bennet conceded. "But I'll not give it up, not till I've hauled my last bloody basket an' got the silver for it right here in my fist. Then, if Bolderon might founder wi'out new winnin's, I'll give it to him."

"In the meantime," said Elspeth, "what?"

"God, Patterson, ye may look like an ordinary woman under a coatin' o' dust but you're a smart one when you're washed."

"Smart enough not t' kill a layin' hen," said Elspeth.

"We can take ninety-five shillin's, easy as makin' water," said Jock Bennet, nodding. "In the rest o' the time below we can cut an' stack. I won't have t' excavate space for the crack widens further on, an' the bottom's so dry the coal will not decay."

"Won't ninety-five bring Mr Rance breathin' on you?" Elspeth said.

"No. Davy's labour will account for the extra." Jock Bennet pushed himself from the table and reached his bonnet and jacket from the peg. "But I want no more talk o' openin' this seam t' Rance or Bolderon, lady. If makin' money distresses you, you're at liberty t' pack your bundle an' seek employment elsewhere. Rackin' for a keelman might suit your delicate nature better, eh?"

Jock Bennet hesitated. He was never quite sure when he had scored over her, for Elspeth seldom sulked and never retreated.

"You're no' much of a one for ale?" he said.

"I prefer tea," said Elspeth.

"How would a pint of sherry wine suit your taste?"

"It would suit my taste fine."

"I'll bring back a jug at supper time."

Elspeth sighed. "I haven't supped sherry for –"

Jock Bennet raised an eyebrow. "How long?"

"Many years," said Elspeth.

"Did the drover buy it for ye?"

"No, I bought it for myself," said Elspeth and, flustered by the collier's questions, hurried out to the stubble field behind the cottage to fetch in sheets and shirts which had dried in the April sun.

Major Walter Seaton had not gotten to see Napoleon Bonaparte on that memorable afternoon of 18th June in 1815. He had missed the sight of *le petit caporal* with greatcoat unbuttoned and flung back to display his epaulettes and green uniform, his cocked hat askew on his head. He had passed along the ridge, had Napoleon, in full sight of the British line, surrounded by staff officers, all brilliant as peacocks but riding, Walter had heard, like jockeys and pot-boys, galloping willy-nilly towards *La Belle Alliance* until they were chased behind the French line by the fire of a few twelve-pound field-pieces.

Major Walter Seaton had not gotten to see Paris, the city of delights, had not participated in the return of the heroic battalions to Scotland, in their triumphal march from Musselburgh to Edinburgh where every street was packed with adulatory crowds and even the Bailies and the Lord Provost managed to turn out to welcome them. By all accounts, the lads were in good trim and loved being lionised. But Seaton did not see them saluted and dismissed in the castle's gloomy old quadrangle, though he did attend, by invitation, the great ball that was given in the Assembly Rooms to show off, for the last time, the handsome cross of St James and his other medals and dance with his sister Suzanne to the strains of Spanish waltzes and Scotch quadrilles.

Like Randall Bontine before him, Major Seaton had been denied the pleasures of victory by a wound. He had been brought down on the Brussels road in an encounter with an outpost of stragglers who were hidden behind the hay cart of some Flemish clodpole not far from Quatre-Bras. He had been back in a sick-room in Brussels when the great battle was finally turned.

The ball had taken away the joint of his left elbow. He lost considerable quantities of blood before an assistant-surgeon sawed through the bone and removed his arm some six inches below the shoulder. It was neat enough done and, to Seaton's surprise, he had recovered swiftly from the shock and its attendant fever. He did not, however, recover from the inconvenience of having but one fin to fight with and, as soon as was decent, resigned himself to return to Scotland and abandoned all thought of a further career as a serving officer.

From Edinburgh, after the rejoicings, Seaton had returned home with his sister to the family seat in Aberdeenshire, a glad enough house set in an extensive and well-managed estate in one of the long tame valleys that lay between Dee and Don. Walter, though, would never be laird of Piperhaugh. He was the youngest of seven sons and his father, an old, old man of eighty-three, still lived, though he had sensibly abrogated all but the title to Augustus, who was himself not far off sixty and had five grown sons of his own.

The Piperhaugh Seatons were part of a great, scattered clan of Seatons who, over the decades, had sought fortune in foreign lands. Walter and Suzanne had brothers, cousins, aunts and nephews all over the globe. For a far-flung family they were remarkably free of feuds and Father Seaton and Augustus conducted a vast correspondence with all the émigrés and knew, more or less, where each was to be found and how he or she fared.

Piperhaugh was home for Walter. A place would always be found for him at the table. All the sons who bided at home – three including Augustus – and all the nephews and nieces and in-laws had a weep for the one-armed warrior and praised

God that most of him had been returned to them. None wept more than Suzanne for she had always loved her brother Walter best of all her kin.

Welcome though he was there, Walter could not rest at ease in Piperhaugh. Using the allowance which his father pressed upon him, he gathered Suzanne into a four-horse coach, stuck her maid inside and his man on the dicky and set off, at the reins no less, though he had but one hand to steer with, to visit his friend Randall Bontine and, by the by, to see what sort of career he might find for himself in the course of the tour.

If it was in Walter's mind that he might find a personable husband for Suzanne he let no hint of it slip. Nonetheless he was gratified that Randall took to Suzanne and she to Randall, and that both his fellow major and his vivacious sister confided, at various times, that the attraction between them grew stronger day by day.

No cuckoo, no leech, Walter was not a man to prey on the hospitality of friends. He had intended to stay at Ottershaw for two weeks, no longer. Randall would have none of it. Randall insisted, absolutely insisted, that Walter and Suzanne remain as his guests until fair May weather made the roads less sore. The forward journey had been cold and rough and if Walter was not moved by Randall's hospitable pleas – which he was – he was certainly persuaded by his sister's little tears and the whispered confession that she wanted to stay here in Ottershaw, for ever.

Walter correctly interpreted this to mean that Suzanne had fallen in love with Randall. Forthwith he took it upon himself to drop a discreet word in Randall's ear that his sister had lost her heart, as young girls will, and that he, Randall, must not take it too seriously. Walter also thought it wise to mention that Suzanne was not without a dowry and would bring to her marriage the revenue from a small parcel of land or, if her bridegroom preferred it, a sum of guineas. Randall feigned indifference to this information, professed that Suzanne's affectionate respect was all that he wanted, and went on to assure Walter that he would treat the young woman properly and not impose upon her temporary infatuation. Randall also claimed that he had not been so happy since the day he had ridden at the head of his first troop, an analogy that Walter Seaton understood only too well.

The true state of affairs was not quite so light and airy. Suzanne was wildly in love with Randall Bontine. She found in the laird of Ottershaw a man not unlike her beloved Walter, though less mild and charitable. She wanted to become his wife. It would be a sound match. She was nobility and not poor. He had a titled estate and a house. What was not explicable was her desire for him, her indelicate longing to be made love to by the soldier-laird of Ottershaw.

If Randall had met Suzanne Seaton in an Edinburgh salon or the drawing-room of a Glasgow hostess, he would have seduced her, loved her, and disentangled himself from a permanent relationship once he had had his way. But Suzanne Seaton was the sister of a close comrade, a friend who had attended him in his hour of need in far-off Spain, and it would be marriage or nothing for the sake of honour and decency.

Though they talked of Egypt and of Spain, of battles fought, of rumbustious drinking in the mess, of horses and brave deeds, talked endlessly and with conceit about the regiments and battalions, it had all slipped away from Randall Bontine. He was not the same man who had courted danger, flirted with death and stormed the walls of Almarez. Balnesmoor's tenants and Ottershaw's parks, the keeping of accounts and the tending of sheep, had all laid soft paws on him, had made him motionless enough for change to catch up with him. And with it, since he had sent Anna Sinclair away, had come unconscionable loneliness. He was surrounded by servants; but he had no friend.

It was not memories of his glorious past that Walter Seaton brought to Randall Bontine so much as a knowledge that his youth was over. The Seatons brought change, change within the context of the duties and traditions of Ottershaw for the Seatons came from the same sort of land-owning stock as did Randall and had never, as he had once done, scorned it. He was damned glad of their company, glad of an excuse to light the candelabra in the dining-room, build up the fires, air empty rooms where once Alicia had held sway, glad to have an excuse for not working day and night, for coming out of the library, out of his shell.

Dunn, Sir Randall's trusted valet, measured the master, took the lengths to Mr Petrie's tailor shop in Harlwood with instruction as to the material to be used. In due course Mr Petrie produced the suiting and came to Ottershaw himself to take in a tuck here and a seam there, and to display other fashionable shapes and accessory wares. Evening dress, with a striking change of coloured waistcoats, a coat with a velvet collar, new hessians for riding out, a tweed sporting coat and mated trousers, shirts, cravats and stockings of silk not wool all appeared in Sir Randall Bontine's closets. Twice each day, before breakfast and before dinner, Dunn shaved the master with scented lather, and old Hunter, blowing the dust off his memory, recalled how to use a heated scissor to plant a few masculine curls around the master's [illegible]

Sir Randall remembered how to laugh aloud, how to converse in French, to be charming and teasing as well as masterful and arrogant.

From the cellar he had dragged out an old spinet upon which his mother used to play, decades ago. It was dusted and polished and a tuner was brought in specially from Glasgow to adjust the wires. Suzanne played upon it after dinner. Randall and Walter sang. Randall was persuaded to find the old bagpipes that his father had owned and to puff and drone on them while Walter, his good arm held elegantly above his head, retraced the steps of a reel he had learned in dancing-school then showed off a fandango taught him by a dark-eyed whore in old Castile.

In the servants' hall, where Hunter fussed, and Mrs Lacy perspired over delicate dishes whose names she could not pronounce, the sounds of laughter echoed. The servants made eyes at each other in a knowing way and both enjoyed and resented the novel air of gaiety that the advent of guests had brought to staid old Ottershaw.

Walter Seaton, however, was a shrewd drawing-room tactician. Perhaps he had not sought Randall Bontine as a husband for his sister but with the discovery that such a match was possible his skill came into play. He realised that he would have to take Suzanne away from Ottershaw before she could be invited to return. Spring would soon give way to summer and the duties of the property would claim Randall's time. Ottershaw was not so large as Piperhaugh nor so well tended. The laird himself would here have to give the lead for cattle-sellings and tree-cuttings and the various sowings and harvestings. The new grieve was honest and efficient but it was not his purse that rain might turn to mush, his income that would suffer if sheep-gathering was done too late for market. God knows, farming prices were erratic enough in this turbulent time, and Randall not so skilled that he could do it all by signals of the hand.

No, Seaton decided, he must concoct an excuse to leave on a particular date and hold to it over Randall's protests and Suzanne's tears. He hoped that absence would fan a flame in Randall Bontine as well as in his sister, and would go home and prepare his father and brothers for the fact that the youngest might be on her road to the altar. He would certainly recommend the match to them in glowing terms.

"We must leave, alas, on Monday," he announced one morning at the breakfast table.

To his chagrin, Randall nodded. "I understand. It's selfish of me to lay claim to you for so long."

Suzanne's eyes were blue and round. She stretched her graceful neck so that it appeared to be on a stalk, like a flower. She was not entirely lost in the game that Walter had been playing on her behalf, however, and not impertinent enough to argue with him there and then. But she too was dismayed by Randall's abrupt agreement to the plan of departure for she did not read into it a subtle strategy.

That night, in an interval in the playing of the spinet, Randall left the drawing-room and returned bearing an old, leather-bound book in which he had marked certain pages with figs of paper.

He opened the volume and laid it on the lid of the spinet.

"Seatons, do you see this?" he said, smiling.

"What is that book, Randall?" Suzanne asked, leaning forward on the square stool and inadvertently showing her pretty bosom, half exposed, to the laird. "It appears to be very ancient."

"It is almost two hundred and fifty years since it was printed," said Randall, hands on each side of the open book.

"Can't imagine which of my ancestors might have purchased it."

Seaton put down his glass and stepped to Randall's side. "What's its title?"

"Anatomie of Abuses," Randall said.

"What, sir!" said Suzanne cheerfully. "Do you intend to abuse us before we go?"

"I would not be so churlish," Randall answered, "nor would I need a written prompt."

"What particular passage have you marked to rail us with, old scallywag?" said Walter.

"Listen." Forefinger tracing the text, Randall read aloud. *"First, all the wild heads of the parish, conventing together, elect a grand captain of mischief, and him they crown with great solemnity, and adopt for their king."*

"Hah!" said Walter Seaton. "You would be royalty for sure, Bontine, in such a society; a 'grand captain of mischief', indeed."

Randall continued to quote. *"This king anointed, chooseth for the twenty, forty, three score or an hundred lusty guts—"*

"Lusty guts!" Seaton laughed. "Oh, how I like that, Randall."

" – like to himself to wait upon his lordly majesty and to serve his person. Then every one of these his court, he investeth with liveries of green, yellow or some other light wanton colour. And were this not gaudy enough, I should say—"

"I should say so too," put in Walter Seaton, an arm about Randall's shoulder as he followed the movement of the forefinger down the dusty page.

" – they bedeck themselves with scarfs, ribbons and laces, hanged all over with gold rings, precious stones and other jewels borrowed for the most part of their pretty mopsies and loving bessies, for bussing them in the dark."

"La, la!" said Suzanne, looking at Randall's lips moving as he read, flickering her lashes just a little when he paused to glance at her.

"Thus," Randall went on, reading, *"all things set in order, then have they their hobby horses, dragons and other antiques, together with their bawdy pipers and thundering drummers, to strike up the devil's dance, withal."*

"How pagan!" said Seaton. "How deliciously pagan!"

"The devil's dance, withal?" said Suzanne.

"Aye, would kirk elders nowadays not turn purple at such a gathering?" said Seaton.

"What do they do next?" Suzanne asked.

"Many odd things," said Randall. "The account refers to Englishmen, of course; and they, as a race, have always been prone to silliness. However, they did have a purpose, these chaps, and not one I would care to mock."

"Read on, Macduff," said Walter Seaton.

Randall quoted, *"And all this done, they return to where they have their summer halls, their bowers, arbors and banqueting houses set up, wherein they feast, banquet and dance all that day and, peradventure, all that night too. And thus these terrestrial furies welcome in the May."*

"Hah!" said Seaton. "What harm can there be in welcoming the May? May is a month I warmly welcome since it presages summer."

Smiling, Randall gently closed the volume.

"I would not draw the line at being a 'terrestrial fury' for an evening, would you, Seaton, old fellow?"

"It has an appealing ring to it, certainly."

"Randall, what do you mean?" said Suzanne.

"I mean that I think I'll summon a batch of bawdy pipers and thundering drummers, send out invitations to a few of the local lusty guts, and have a ball to welcome the May. What say you, Seaton? Would you stay for that?"

"How long?"

"Two weeks should give sufficient time for invitations to be written, sent and answered. Shall we say, two weeks come Friday?"

"We had planned to be away by –" Walter Seaton began.

Suzanne was off the stool and at her brother's side, her slender fingers on his sleeve, her cheek against his side-whisker.

"Oh, Walter! We *must* stay. We *must*."

"Do you want us to 'crown' you, Randall, as this grand captain of mischief?" Walter Seaton said. "Is that it?"

"I fear I need no crown for that office," said Randall. "However, is it agreed? Will you be the honoured guests at Ottershaw's May Ball?"

"Yes," Suzanne chirped. "Yes, oh, yes."

"We'll have the big hall cleared," said Randall. "And we'll feed all the servants too, out there in the pasture under lanterns in the trees."

"What if it rains?" said Seaton.

"It would not dare," said Randall.

To forsake the soft greening dawns of spring for the black unchanging landscapes of the pit took effort of will even in men and women to whom the work was all. There was no trace of April under the ladders, except that the air seemed oddly humid and sweat broke more readily from the skin. Even when he was not toiling up and down his four-step treadmill Davy Bennet sweated. It was a peculiar infirmity for Davy had not a pick of fat on his frame and his chest was narrow and his ribs could be counted like tally sticks.

Davy also had a cough as round and brassy as a hunting-horn. The sound of it echoed out of the fissure and a good way along the narrow tunnel. The cough was so persistent that Jock had bought his son a patent remedy from Nicol's shop to try to be rid of it. The medicine came in a long brown bottle which Jock wrapped in rags and bound with twine so that Davy could carry it down below without risk of breakage. Every five or ten minutes Davy would drag the bottle from its niche, uncork it with his teeth and, like a little toper, suck a mouthful of the black liquid in the hope that it would cool the ache in his chest. The remedy offered more comfort than cure, however, and the cough, though it might abate for a while, seemed permanent.

The medicine curdled Davy's breath and he exuded the pungent odours of gum-ammoniac and poppy syrup to add to the nuisance of the noise. As the shift progressed he would grow progressively weaker. The coal lumps that he dragged from the hewer's room and carried to the steps seemed to increase in volume, to grow monstrous heavy. His fingers would turn to pith, his forearms to straw. He would drop a lump here, a lump there, sometimes gashing a knee, bruising an ankle or causing a toe to swell. He hardly seemed to notice his wounds, would cough, not cry, while he stooped and fumbled for the fallen coal, cough as he lumbered to the steps and climbed them, cough as he levered the burden up and through the trap to Mouse or Elspeth.

Elspeth was concerned about the boy. At the sight of his chalky, dirt-smeared face poking out of the trap, she would forget her own aches and pains and would try to cheer him with nonsensical conversations.

"Davy, Davy?"

"Wha'?"

"D'you know what time it is?"

Davy would consider the question, fingers gripping the edge of the trap, eyes glazed and stupid. He would cough, cough, cough, shake his head.

"Nah."

"Time you had a clock."

"Ah-hah," he would say and cough, not laugh.

"Davy?"

"Wha'?"

"Dinna fall off the step."

"Nah."

"Davy?"

"Aye."

Elspeth would chant a riddle, "*Drawers o' water an' hewers o' coal, all fell into a big black hole –*"and would wait, encouragingly, for Davy to complete the rhyme. But Davy could not think of the words, though he knew them well enough. His brain would not function when coal-dust was thicker than the particles of air and his arms were racked with carrying and his neck would hardly support his heavy, clouded head.

"Davy, Davy?" Elspeth would say, sharp and urgent, to wake him from enshrouding sleep. *"Davy, answer me."*

At his own insistence he wore a little loincloth that dangled from the leather strap that circled his waist. When he grew tired he lost interest in modesty and the cloth flapped loose and Elspeth would glimpse his parts, tiny and unformed and innocently white.

"Davy, please," she would beg. *"Talk t' me."*

But if she raised her voice much above a whisper Jock Bennet would hear her and would call out, "Shut your mouth, lady, an' let him get on wi' the work."

Daddy's reprimand would steel the boy. He would scowl, cough, scowl, say, "Aye, let me get on wi' the bloody work, for Christ's sake," and go stepping down again close to his father, source of whatever strength he still possessed.

Passing Mouse in the broad tunnel, Elspeth would voice her fear. "He's sick, your brother."

Mouse would snort and answer, "Aye, sick lazy."

Even Willie Ogilvie, however, twigged that Davy Bennet was not fit to be so far down, not fit, perhaps, to be labouring at all. Once or twice, when Davy's cough was especially raucous, Ogilvie would lean out from under the eave and shout at Elspeth as she crawled past his room, "God, what's wrong wi' that lad? T' hear the way he splutters you'd think he was gnawin' the coal off the bloody wall."

At all costs Elspeth must remain loyal to the Bennets and could not confide her anxieties to her neighbour.

"Davy's fine, Mr Ogilvie," she would say. "He just hasn't got used t' the dust yet."

"Tell him from me t' breathe through his nose, then."

"Aye, Mr Ogilvie."

If Elspeth had told Ogilvie her opinion that Davy Bennet was being worked to death, the miner would have been scandalised. It was not cruelty that made the colliers of the Abbeyfield so casual about their kin but refusal to acknowledge that frailty might exist at all in their midst. At least she had persuaded Jock Bennet not to bring Sarah down to haul for him. She had saved the young girl from that fate, for the time being.

While Elspeth dragged the recalcitrant sled through the tunnels, while she transferred the load to a creel at the ladder foot, slipped the broad straps over her shoulder, while she climbed precariously from rung to rung, while she staggered the last stretch along the broad road to Elginbrod's stall for weighing and checking, she had little enough on her mind, not even worry. The demands on her body obliterated all thought. When she was free of the dead weight of the coal, however, and returned with empty creel, unladen sled, anxiety would uncoil again and she would find herself hurrying along the tunnels to check on Davy.

It was ironic, really, that she should be more concerned about the lad's welfare than were his sister or father. She did not much like Davy Bennet. In his heart the boy believed himself to be a great baying hound of manly virtue, full of strength and conceit. If his lungs recovered and his body grew he would one day become a master far worse than his daddy. Now, however, Elspeth pitied him for his weakness and his illusions. Nothing he did or said could shake her compassion for the puny wee pup who would be lucky to see another winter let alone another spring.

She met Mouse with a laden sled; three hundredweights of dusty great coal. Elspeth pressed herself against the side of the broad tunnel, for an 'outward' hauler had right of passage. The girl-child elbowed past her without a word. When Mouse shuffled on towards the ladder Elspeth filled the tunnel that Mouse had vacated. Thirty feet further on she had to 'lie' again to let Milly Ogilvie squeeze past. Again there was no exchange of greetings. Milly's dumb, bovine features were screwed up with the effort of the haul and she hardly seemed to see Elspeth let alone wish to converse with her.

When Milly had gone, Elspeth slapped her sled down from its slanted position against the wall and went on past Mr Ogilvie's room. Peggie Ogilvie was loading from the ree that Willie had pushed behind him with his feet but Peggie gave no more sign of recognition than had her sister and Elspeth crawled out of range of the neighbour's candle and came to the mouth of the narrow tunnel.

Hunching, dipping her hips, she adjusted the sled's handle between her thighs. From up ahead she heard Davy's cough. She fitted her shoulders to the shape of the hole, then stiffened. Sound boomed from the tunnel, a crack, a rumble, a vibration against her skin. Instantly Elspeth tugged down her hood to cover her face. She tensed her spine and raised her bottom to jam against the roof as if she might have to hold the overlay in place by herself. She sucked in frightened breath.

Dust billowed in a solid wall from the tunnel, enveloped her. She closed her eyes tightly, compressed her lips, arched her back and tucked her chin to her chest. The cloud spread over her, coating her with fine grains. She did not dare open her eyes. She waited for the next drum of sound to roll up the tunnel, for the splintering that would announce a fall. There was no second wave, only foggy silence out of which, after a minute or so, came the rattle of Davy's cough.

Elspeth opened her eyes. Dust billowed into grey visibility. She peered along the narrow tunnel in search of Mr Bennet's candle. She could not bring herself to stir, however, not even when Davy coughed again.

"What the hell was that?" Willie Ogilvie shouted.

Elspeth looked back under arm. Peggie Ogilvie was crouched by the side of her father's room. Elspeth could only make out her pantaloons and one black-knuckled fist planted on the floor by the candle-cup.

"I – I canna tell," said Elspeth, stupidly.

"Was it a fall? Was it a bloody fall?" Peggie Ogilvie demanded shrilly.

Before Elspeth could contrive an answer, she heard a hoarse voice from the narrow tunnel. "*Roof's sound. All's solid, never fear.*" Jock Bennet cried the news with a seething heartiness. "*Everythin's fine here, Willie. Everythin's secure.*"

"What's that he's sayin'?" hissed Peggie Ogilvie. "Is it no' a fall?"

"No, no," Elspeth said. "It's just coal comin' down."

Davy's monotonous cough added a convincing touch to Jock's claim that nothing was amiss. But now that the dust had settled Peggie Ogilvie stooped, peered along at Elspeth and, to exorcise her fright, swore fiercely at her.

Elspeth, shaken too, was in no mood to take lip.

She shouted, "God in Heaven, Peggie! Do ye think it was my doin'? Keep your dirty tongue off me, hear?"

Willie Ogilvie chuckled. He had not even rolled off the cutting-stool, had paused in his wedging or shelling only when the remnants of the coal-dust sifted into his room. He was used to the din of coal-falls, and to squabbling women. Elspeth heard him say, "Back t' your work, Peg," and Peggie Ogilvie retreated from view.

Leaving the empty sled where it was, Elspeth thrust herself at once into the narrow tunnel and, with knees skating through a layer of fresh black dust, hastened to Mr Bennet's room and the door that led past the millstone.

Miraculously, the candle was still alight. By its halo she saw Davy. He was half-way through the trap, blacker than Elspeth had ever seen a collier, blacker than a sweep's brush. The moment that he caught sight of her, he ceased his struggles and flopped on to his side, coughing.

"Davy, what is it?"

He fought for breath, gasping, coughing, gasping again.

"Da – Da's trappit."

"But I heard his voice, his shout."

"Caught under the coal, down there," Davy wheezed.

"Is it bad?"

"I think he's finished," Davy said and, with hands to his face, burst into tears.

The day of the week was the same, the hour the same, the setting identical to that of their previous meeting. Only the weather had changed. It was a fine bright skittish April day and hedges at the bottom of the garden whisked and tossed as if shaking off winter's dust.

Though he had enjoyed the drive from Dumbarton that morning, Angus Hildebrand did not pay heed to the weather or the scene from the library window. He applied his formidable concentration upon Mr Moodie who sat, as before, behind the library table with fists squared upon its top as if waiting for a feast to be placed before him. Mr Hildebrand had brought such a feast, a banquet of legal documents, in his big battered leather box. He hoisted it on to the table and extracted from it, in the sequence in which they would be required, the testament, the will, the waiver, and the letters of liquidation.

Hildebrand studied the weaver for a long moment but could not quite evaluate the state of the man's attention or understanding. He sat, did James Moodie, like a wooden carving, all hollow and scraped and grained, and uttered not a word while the lawyer arranged the papers and put the box away below the table.

"May I proceed, Mr Moodie?"

"Proceed, sir," said James Moodie.

"I have found a way, Mr Moodie, of doing what you ask."

A twitch of the mouth was all the response that Moodie gave. He did not display pleasure or curiosity but, Hildebrand thought, he might have intended his lips to form a smile.

"The manner of it may not be orthodox. Indeed, it is a procedure that I have not used before or even heard of but—"

"Will it work?"

"Yes."

"Tell me how it'll work," said James.

He was more *compos mentis* than he had been two weeks ago. The bizarre nature of the illness that possessed him, whether it be of physical or spiritual origin, had enabled him to clear that part of his brain which had once so expertly grappled with the fine points of business finance.

With more confidence, Angus Hildebrand went on. "I have drafted a series of documents which, with your approval and the incorporation of any amendments which you wish to suggest, I will put this week into final form. The testament is the first and most important of these documents."

Hildebrand separated two sheets of foolscap paper from the summit of the pile and slid them between Moodie's motionless fists.

Moodie glanced down but made no attempt to read the screeds of copperplate script which Mr Hildebrand had, in person, penned.

Angus Hildebrand said, "I have used the testament in its strict and original sense; to wit – confined to the nomination of executors, to specifying the name of the administrator of your moveable estate. I wish you, sir, to nominate me."

James Moodie said, "Why?"

"If I hold the office under the appointment of a deceased party, as a trustee for others, I have a stronger hold upon the administration of the estate than I would have if I am merely appointed by the commissary. My legal right to deal with the wishes and bequests set forth in your will cannot be challenged by other parties."

Moodie's mouth twitched once more.

"Pray," he said, "continue."

"In competition, the executor-nominate holds a dominant position over all others, including even the widow and next-of-kin. Your sisters cannot challenge this position and must, if they wish so to do, base appeals only against unusual clauses and dispositions in the will and its directives."

"As executor can you not claim one third?"

"No, not one third," said Hildebrand, gratified that Mr

Moodie was sufficiently sane to follow the strategy and to fix upon its pitfalls. "If you nominate me as executor-trustee, and we agree the fee beforehand and state it, then I cannot make the claim for one third of the estate that remains after settlements and adjustments. Besides, I have drafted a waiver, which I will sign, and we will have witnessed. This I will leave with you, Mr Moodie, to place in the keeping of a safe person; with the parish minister or your banker."

"Yes," Moodie said.

"In essence you wish to preserve your estate as a working entity. Because it is not land-based – that is, has not a tenantry as such but is a manufactory – the court may concern itself that the estate will incur debts which will involve the *magisters* in complicated proceedings."

"Duties an' taxes," said Moodie cryptically.

"Certainly," said Hildebrand. "But other outgoings too. Payment of wages, for example."

"What can I do?"

"Liquidate those peripheral assets which it would be difficult to protect against fraud and theft," Hildebrand replied.

"My interest in the dye-works?"

"Certainly. Also the sheep which graze on pastures which you do not lease directly but only contract."

"Aye."

"Also a number of similar assets which I've catalogued separately on this page." Hildebrand placed the appropriate sheet before Moodie but the weaver did not even lower his eyes. "Liquidate your peripheral assets and accumulate the sums raised by sale into a fund distinct from your current capital accounts; in another bank, perhaps. From this fund all taxes and duties will be paid. The balance will stand as surety against claims on the estate for a period of two years or longer after your demise."

"Will the court bear with this ruse?"

"It's not a deception, Mr Moodie. It's unusual but it is perfectly within the law."

"What'll be left for Elspeth?"

"The mill at Kennart, in production, and the bulk of those assets by which the mill is maintained."

"My house?"

"Moss House is not a particular problem."

"The grazing hillside I lease from Bontine?"

"Local leases must be honoured at the terms by which they were originally negotiated, until the period of the lease expires, although such leases are not usually designated as part of the heritage. In this special case the Bontine lease will be."

"How long can you hold off my sisters?"

"Six months are allowed for the executor to do due diligence. It is my feeling that the six-month period may be incorporated into the twenty-four-month period of status quo that you state as your will."

"Will – will my sisters not—"

"Your sisters, separately or in tandem, may elect to challenge the validity of the will in the absence of widow and heir. But no right-minded member of my profession would dare make a petition for court intervention before the two-year period has terminated."

"How long after that?"

Hildebrand raised his shoulders. "As long as I can prevaricate; at the least, another full year. But the inheritor, your wife, must return as soon as possible after your – after your will comes into force."

"She'll come."

"It would be valuable to have knowledge of her whereabouts, Mr Moodie," said Angus Hildebrand.

"Elspeth will come," James said, "when there's a place for her."

The lawyer glanced over his shoulder, leaned across the table, whispered, "Mr Moodie, your gross annual revenue is close to seven thousand pounds. Your total worth, not accounting for the sale of Moss House, is near seventy thousand. You, sir, are a wealthy man. I fear that your wealth will engender much attention when it is known and that I'll not be able to stave off your sisters' claims for ever, not if they prepare their petitions thoroughly."

James ignored the warning.

"What else?" he said.

Hildebrand sank back into the chair. "I'm no younger than you are, Mr Moodie. We must therefore ensure that if I, perchance, predecease you—"

"What else?"

"If your wife and child – God forbid it – are not traced before your death, how will I notify them of your wishes? The court, in time, may presume them to be dead."

"Elspeth will come back to Balnesmoor."

"But where is she now, Mr Moodie?"

"Looking for a place."

"A place?"

"Which I will provide."

Cautiously Hildebrand said, "What if she has found a place elsewhere, sir?"

James did not answer him.

After answering a few more questions James Moodie's interest in legal detail seemed to weaken and the lawyer was dismissed, sent back to his chambers in Dumbarton to finalise the drafts and, with the weaver's sanction, to prepare them for Moodie's signature.

With her forefinger she scooped dirt from the cup and tweaked the clotted tallow so that the candle would burn strongly and not splutter and expire in the thick atmosphere below.

Still weeping, Davy held out both hands to receive the cup and, urged on by Elspeth, retreated bodily through the trap and down the steps again into the crack along the seam.

It was perfectly quiet now, perfectly still.

Elspeth listened for rock creaking, the groan of the coal settling but she could hear nothing, not even a whimper or moan from the square hole in the marl. Mouse was prone to make large of things, to exaggerate events. But Davy was not given to this habit. She felt queasy with nervousness as she dragged herself up the mound and put her head and shoulders into the trap. She looked down. Everything was as before, except that atoms of dust hung in the air and gave to the candle-flame a coppery tint.

Davy coughed.

"How is he, Davy?" she whispered.

"Lady, come down," Jock Bennet answered her.

The hewer's voice sounded strong, commanding. Elspeth's relief was instantly transmuted into an irrational fear of descent into the fissure and anger that she should be forced to undertake it.

She wriggled round, backed into the hole and lowered herself over the board at the lip. She went down into wan light, looking out for a final moment at the lineaments of the old room and the tunnel which suddenly seemed friendly and secure even in deep gloom. She gathered herself, steeled herself and stepped down to the dry, gritty bottom.

She could stand upright here. Though stippled with black dust, the wall showed the grain of the millstone. She saw that she was under a gigantic sloping slab, like a pantile roof, a slab that stretched unbroken as far as her eye could see, as far as candlelight reached. A buttress of big coal created a corner and around it was the section where Jock Bennet had begun his flensing of the seam.

Elspeth had not appreciated before just how large the seam really was, that Mouse's claim that it was higher than her head did not do it justice. Visible coal, lying nakedly exposed and not in need of clearing or preliminary excavation, was ten or eleven feet in height and did not dwindle to any degree along the length of the natural fault. Elspeth spared only a brief wondering glance at the seam for she was drawn, with returning horror, to the crouched figure of the boy and to the tumulus of fresh-fallen coal that barred passage along the cavern.

She could see the iron bar that Mr Bennet had been using, even the rutted places where he had driven wedges, his hammer lying flung to the left. She could see how the whole cut had come on him while he knelt, straining on the long bar, how he had pitched backwards from it, how it had snapped down upon him, like a trap upon a rabbit.

Jock Bennet was conscious, irascible, tormented by pain – and dying. Elspeth had no doubt of it. His body was caught below the rock and blood oozed from the flutings, mixed black as the coal itself. He bled from the side of the lips, a thin, bright red trickle that bubbled when he spoke.

"Get me bloody out of here, Patterson," he seethed.

She gaped at him, bent over, hands on her knees.

Kneeling by his father's head, looking helplessly down at him, Davy coughed, and sobbed.

"He's – he's bloody useless, crying like a damned bairn." Jock Bennet clenched his teeth, then his tongue snaked out and wiped away the dribble of blood, which immediately reappeared, growing sluggishly from a single shining droplet. "You, lady, you get me out."

"I'll – I'll fetch –" Elspeth whispered.

"Fetch nobody."

"But you're wounded sore, Mr Bennet."

Destroyed, damned, Jock Bennet would not recant. He would not yield up the power of his authority or imperil the hoard of coal that luck had led him to. He did not believe, did not accept that he was finished.

Elspeth swallowed, tasting dust. She pushed Davy to one side, disturbing his wake-like pose, and snatched the candle-cup from his fingers. She could see Mr Bennet's eyeballs glistening redly as she circulated the candle around him, examining the exact nature of his wounds, those that could be seen.

"Lift the bloody slab, damn you."

"I'm goin' for Mr Rance."

She could not believe that he had strength enough in half a body to grip her with such ferocity. He caught her high up under the armpit and dragged himself six or seven inches out from under the slabby coal, brought a cry out of himself as his flesh tore, ignored it as if it was a stranger who had uttered the demeaning sound.

"Do that, Patterson, an' I'll flay your bloody hide," he hissed. The blood in his mouth sprayed and freckled the stubble on his chin, the bare and hairless skin of his chest. "Lift the rocks. Free me. Get me out t' the old room."

"Davy?" Elspeth did not know what to do.

"Davy," Daddy snapped, "pay heed."

Elspeth thought of Mouse. The girl child would have unloaded by now and would in all likelihood be coming down the ladder from first or second level, the creel bouncing on her narrow back. In ten minutes or less she would appear innocently at the trap, would learn what had occurred and, Daddy notwithstanding, would set up a tremendous howling that would have the Ogilvies along in a trice, and others soon after.

Elspeth might flout his order, defy him, might go up and along the tunnel, have help here in a quarter of an hour. He, her master, could do nothing to prevent it. Davy would not. But then Jock Bennet might not die. Sheer tenacity might keep him alive and, if that happened, he would never forgive her disobedience and would make her pay for it dearly.

"Do this for me, lady, an' I'll ask nothin' else." In his throat Elspeth could hear the little resinous rub of desperation. "Please, do it for me."

"Get the bar, Davy," she said.

The boy's reaction was spontaneous. She could not be sure if he supposed that she might work some miracle which would save his daddy or if he merely obeyed out of habit. She did not have to tell him what was required. He inserted the long iron bar under the fractured slate of coal, wedged it firmly and flung his weight upon it.

The coal growled. Jock Bennet gasped and thrashed his head in agony. The bar quivered. Davy pumped on it again. Shards of coal, scalloping the edge of the slate, flaked from about the bar as the boy applied all the pressure that his strength allowed.

The slab of coal shifted, rising.

Sweat dripped from Davy's brow and coagulated on his arms and belly. Centring his effort he drove again into the bar. Jock Bennet's eyes stared hideously, his mouth sagged open into a hideous parody of laughter. The words came croaking from his throat. "Aye, Davy, that's it. That's it, Davy. Good lad."

Kneeling, Elspeth straightened her arms and braced herself on all fours. Jock Bennet gripped her shoulders, strained and dragged himself from under the slab, inch by tearing inch. In spite of his pain and the sudden welter of wet, warm blood that filled the wounds in his belly, he persisted, drawing himself out as rapidly as he dared. With a guttural cry he came free, and Elspeth dragged him sideways clear of the tumulus and along the floor towards the steps.

Davy released the bar. It sprang from the coal like a spear and clattered against the wall, while Davy danced away from it, arms over his head, and the slab settled again with a sound like teeth on bones.

Still clasping Elspeth's arms Jock Bennet pulled himself into a sitting position. He looked down at his body. Pain appeared to have eased away. He gave a wry chuckle, twisted his head and spat.

"Christ, what a mess I am," he said.

Blood oozed through the dirt, a puckered soft red rising that might have come from nothing more serious than grazing of the skin. Elspeth was not deceived. She could see the ends of bone protruding through muscles and the wounds of his crushed and punctured belly which had taken the brunt of the weight of the fall. It was astonishing that Jock Bennet had not died instantly, that he could still think rationally and rap out orders. It was as if he had somehow separated himself from the wrecked flesh below his waist, risen above his body altogether.

"Get me out o' here," he said.

Behind them Davy was racked by a spasm of coughing brought on by effort and lack of air.

"How can we safely move you, Mr Bennet?"

"Just get me out," Jock Bennet shouted, "an' see the trap sealed behind us."

Elspeth understood. She could hardly believe it. Jock Bennet was not concerned with the process of living or dying, only with protecting the coal seam, with guarding his secret. Some of the man's callous indifference to his fate infected Elspeth too. She could not be held to blame if he succumbed to shock or a loss of blood induced by violent motion.

"Lift me out, damn it."

She slipped a hand under his armpits and dragged him along the sandy bottom to the foot of the steps.

At any moment Mouse might arrive. She had not a moment to spare. What with Mouse screaming, Davy sobbing and Jock Bennet bellowing orders with his dying breath, there would be no hope of carrying out the collier's 'last wish' before the Ogilvies were roused and the secret revealed. She could do nothing to ease his pain, or staunch the bleeding. All she could do was obey him.

She manhandled him to the steps and, bent and panting, dragged him on to them. Davy appeared, candle in hand, and on Elspeth's instruction lifted his father's legs and feet. Together they raised Jock Bennet up the steps, out of the trap and on to the marl. He was still conscious, though his eyes were screwed shut and blood clung to his chin like a beard. He could no longer shout commands, however; he could barely whisper.

Feebly, he beckoned Elspeth to him.

She knelt, ear to his lips.

"Close – close – hide—"

She nodded, patted his shoulder soothingly, then drew him down the slope away from the hole to allow Davy to pull himself from the fissure and to wrestle the little wooden door into position.

"Davy, do y' know what to do?"

"Aye."

"I'm goin' to take him out, through the tunnel."

"Aye."

Turning, she slid Jock Bennet along the floor on his back, past his old room towards the narrowing. The section was thirty feet long, crawl-tight as a worm-cast and black as eternal night.

Stretched almost flat, Elspeth went in tail foremost. She wished now that she had not abandoned the sled. She could have rolled him on to it and dragged him out on the runners. Davy was tamping the door into its frame. A minute or two of work with a shovel would cover the trap so that no trace of it was visible.

She lowered her head, whispered, "It's done, Mr Bennet. It's hidden. The seam's sealed."

"Ah," he sighed. "Ah."

She pulled him, moving backwards into the narrow tunnel, and Davy, his task done, scrambled after them bearing the candle-cup.

They had made but half the distance when Davy hissed, "See, he's tryin' t' talk. Stop. Stop."

Elspeth put her ear to his mouth once more.

"Pa'son?"

"Aye, Mr Bennet."

"Are – are ye – there?"

"I'm here, Mr Bennet."

"Look ah—"

"I will. I will. Hold on. We're nearly out."

She threw caution to the winds, tugging him along after her as fast as she could, but he bled his life away somewhere in the section and was dead when she got him to the broad tunnel.

Mouse was suddenly at Elspeth's shoulder. Davy extended the candle and the light flickered over the man's face.

"Mr Bennet. Mr Bennet."

No pulse in the puddle of blood that filled his navel. His eyes, wide open, stared at Elspeth without anger.

Davy looked up, sobbing, at his sister.

"Daddy's dead," he said.

"Aye, so he is," said Mouse in wonderment and, after a moment's pause, filled the tunnel with her screams.

It was early afternoon in Strachan Castle. The men had been out in the fields all day, ploughing the long section since Mr Gibbie had at last given in to Lachlan and furnished money with which to buy a quantity of good grass seed, though he professed not to see much point as his cattle appeared to be doing well enough on the stuff provided by untrammelled nature.

Indoors Anna had put Robbie into his cot in the hope that he might take a nap, for he had been as wild as fury all morning and had flung his dinner about the kitchen until Anna, egged on by Cat, had given him a light little slap on the back of his legs and commanded him, as sternly as she dared, to behave himself and eat his vittles like a good wee lad. Robbie had wailed unremittingly for five minutes and had then scoffed every scrap in his bowl in scowling defiance.

Robert Cochran Sinclair was quiet at last. Aileen was in the kitchen dressing tripe for supper. Anna and Cat were seated at the deal table in the servants' gangway cleaning silver upon which Mistress Alicia had detected a trace of tarnish, which was not surprising since the heavy silverware was never out of its case from one year's end to the next. Cat did not speak to Anna, nor Anna to Cat. Neither of them worked with fervour. The task was not unpleasant and they would spin it out as long as possible, perhaps even until it was time to fetch the cows for milking.

Sir Gibbie had gone out as usual that morning to ride to

Falkirk where the Farmers' Bank had a small office near the market yards. Alicia had ridden over to Harlwood in the gig, returning in time to take early tea in her 'sewing-room' under the round tower. The Bontine brood had been heard but not seen and they too had been put to bed out of Mother's way for an hour or so.

It was Edith Simmons who came for Anna. She delivered Mistress Alicia's summons and waited about, timidly, to ascertain that Anna would obey the lady's command without undue delay.

Anna looked at Cat, Cat at Anna.

"What can *she* want this time o' day?" said Anna.

"The fire'll need made up," said Cat.

"That's your job," said Anna.

"It's not the fire," said Edith Simmons.

"What is it then?"

"The needle."

"The what?"

"Come quick, Anna, or I'll be for it."

Alicia Bontine had grown less gaunt since she had been ousted from Ottershaw to take refuge in Strachan Castle. With the sallow lines of responsibility smoothed away she was, in repose at least, almost handsome. She was seated in the centre of the round chamber which she had claimed as her own. A mahogany chair and a large circular table were placed on an Indian carpet as if measured and geometricised by the rule. A small coal fire burned in the grate. The tea-tray had been removed and Edith had picked up the toys and playthings that the children had scattered behind them. The slot window was open an inch or two to let in the fragrances of a fresh April afternoon.

Edith opened the door for Anna, admitted her, then stepped back, closing the door behind her.

What, Anna wondered, not without trepidation, was the purpose of this private 'interview'?

Alicia wore a day dress of mauve weave, fashioned with gigot sleeves and a low neckline. A fine old Kashmir shawl was draped about her shoulders and a mob cap of the tiniest proportions was perched upon her thick dark hair. Across her lap was a bolt of blue satin material and on the table stood the three baskets that made up her sewing-set, along with a velvet-straw ball bristling with needles and pins.

Anna had no reputation as a seamstress. Indeed the best hand at that sort of skill was nursery-maid Edith Simmons. Puzzled, Anna dropped a nonchalant curtsy which, for once, Alicia acknowledged with an inclination of the head.

"Ah, Sinclair!" Alicia called all the servants 'properly' by surname, which did lead to some confusion with five Sinclairs below stairs. "I trust that I'm not takin' you away from important occupation?"

"No, M'm."

The woman was different today, not acerbic – smug. Anna felt her stomach tighten. Mistress Alicia was just the sort of person who would take pleasure in delivering bad news, especially to her. Could it be Matt? Had Matt been taken by the Riding Officers after all these many months?

"Do you see what I have here?" said Alicia, sweetly.

"Satin, M'm."

"Satin, indeed. Do you know what it's for, Sinclair?"

"No."

"It's for making a gown, Sinclair; a ball gown."

"Very nice, M'm," said Anna, now thoroughly mystified.

Alicia was not about to shorten the interview by coming at once to the point.

Anna said, "What does satin have t' do wi' me, M'm? I'm no use with the needle."

"Much more use with the cows, hm?"

Anna's cheeks burned with temper but, in spite of her self-confidence and the security of her position in the household, she had sense enough not to show her anger at the insult. It was not the time or place, with Mr Gibbie away, to put her position on trial.

"Aye, M'm," she agreed, tight-lipped.

"No, Sinclair, I do not require you to ply the needle. I merely wanted the opinion of a younger person, shall we say, as to the fashionable shape of the bustle."

"Bustle?" Anna said.

"I am aware that servants do keep up with the fashion and, as I do not wish to seem fuddy-duddy, I thought that I might solicit your opinion, to go with Simmons's, as to whether a roll or a sausage would be 'right', shall we say, for a ball gown."

Anna had no idea. It was true that the servants of the *bon ton* knew more than their mistresses about who was wearing what and what was in and what out, but Strachan was a million miles from Edinburgh as far as Anna was concerned. Even Edith Simmons had not been far from the neighbourhood since the Bontines had left Ottershaw.

Alicia's concern for fashion, her desire to extract advice from a humble servant were false leads, opening skips in the game that the mistress was playing with her. Anna's cheeks turned crimson. She curled her fingers into her palms and hid them in the folds of her skirt. Alicia had lost interest in the bolt of material and let it slide from her lap to the floor. She gave it a careless little nudge with her foot and straightened her shoulders, showing the posture of authority, chin lifted, nose lifted, the stare coming down from on high.

"What do you say, Sinclair?"

"Where is the ball?" said Anna.

That was it, that was the question that the bitch wanted her to ask. She felt her belly tighten even more, supposing that the ball was to be held here at Strachan and that Randall would be present.

"Is that important?" said Alicia, with the ghost of a smile.

"City fashion isn't country fashion, M'm."

"How well expressed. The ball, for your information, is to be held at Ottershaw on the tenth day of May. Gilbert and I have, naturally, been invited."

Ottershaw! Anna held her breath. She experienced delirious anticipation, completely out of keeping with the tone of the conversation or with Alicia's manner. She, Anna, had been invited too. Instantly she revised the assumption; had been 'requested' by Randall. Perhaps he had made it a condition of invitation to his sister-in-law. She could imagine the injunction written upon the card: *Bring Anna*. She would need to cadge money from Lachlan to buy herself a pretty dress.

Alicia continued to stare down her nose at Anna but, as if reading the girl's silly thoughts, smiled with fatuous malice.

"Will – will I be goin'?" Anna blurted out.

"You? Why, indeed, would you be going? If I require a maid in attendance I'll take Simmons."

"Take me, M'm."

Alicia laughed, gave a little waggle of her long-boned hand. "I doubt if my brother-in-law would thank me for it."

"Did Ran—did the laird not ask—"

"Ask what?"

She realised that she had been pincered. She would not give the bitch the satisfaction of humiliating her further. Mouth closed, Anna shook her head.

"Sausage, do you think?" said the mistress of Strachan Castle.

It had had nothing to do with bustles. It had to do with the imparting of the information that she, Anna, had not been invited and that she, Alicia Bontine, would not even take her as maid in attendance.

It was, of course, totally unreasonable of Anna to expect an invitation to such a genteel affair, no matter what she had once meant to Randall. But in matters of the heart Anna had never been very rational. The image of Ottershaw all lit and gay, hall and lawns alive with the strains of music, ladies in fine gowns and gentlemen in livery, was irresistible to Anna's imagination; and the thought of Randall—

Alicia intruded. "I cannot recall the last ball at Ottershaw. When Mr Gilbert and I became engaged there was a formal supper, of course, but the old man did not care for social frivolities. I'm delighted to learn that Randall is of a different stamp. It must, I feel, be the influence of the young woman."

Alicia had turned her face away, showing her profile against the window.

"What young woman?" said Anna.

"I hope that it will be the first of many such occasions," said Alicia. "God knows, there's little enough civilised diversion in this part of the country. Society could do with a leader. After his marriage, Randall might very well provide us with one."

"His – *his marriage?*"

Alicia turned her head very slowly, the smile rapacious.

"*What marriage?*" Anna shrieked.

"Oh, it's not formal," the woman said. "The ball is celebratory, so Mr Gilbert says, but it's not a betrothal. Not yet."

"Who is she?"

"So you recommend sausage, do you, Sinclair?" said Alicia. "I am beholden to you for your advice."

"Who is the woman?"

"I do not care for servants who raise their voices to me. You may go now."

"I want t' know who she is."

"Do you, indeed?" Alicia hesitated. She had every intention of telling Sinclair who her rival was. No, not rival. Sinclair had never been in competition with real ladies. She had been Randall's toy, no more.

Alicia said, "She's the daughter of Augustus Seaton of Piperhaugh in Aberdeenshire. She is younger than you, I believe, and my husband informed me that she is fair of face and figure."

"How – how – did he—"

"Really, Sinclair! I cannot waste my time gossipin' with you. Be off."

Anna regained control of herself. She felt as if she had been struck a physical blow. It was all she could do not to throw herself upon Alicia Bontine and drag her to the floor, throttle her until she yielded up all that she knew of this upstart who had taken her place at Ottershaw and, probably, in Randall's bed.

Anna swung round, groping for the door knob.

She would not weep, would not shed tears before Alicia Bontine, for that was what the woman wanted, to see her swelter in misery.

"The lady in question," Alicia called out, "is Miss Suzanne Seaton, sister of Sir Randall's closest friend, a fellow officer, now retired from service."

Anna did not dare face the mistress of the house. She paused only long enough to take in the last scrap of information, then she jerked open the sewing-room door, stumbled out into the corridor and along it and down the circular stairs. Behind her, echoing, she could hear Alicia Bontine's laughter, mocking her all the way to the servants' hall.

Cat looked up from the silverware. "What did she—"

"Damn her!" shouted Anna. *"Damn all of you!"*

She swept her arm across the table and sent knives, forks nd big round spoons clattering to the flagstones; then rushed n, rushed through the kitchen, past Robbie's cot and out of he door into the yard.

Fear, grief and fury welled in her breast but she dammed he emotions up, running out of the yard and down the cow rack and slithering through a gap in the hedge, the way she ad done years ago when she was young and wild on the hill elow Drumglass, before she had met Randall, before he had issed her.

It was not until she reached the shelter of a rough stand of irch and alder on a spit of land above the river that she flung erself down on the ground and buried her face in her arms nd let it flood out, a torrent of tears, fast and furious as an pril storm.

When it was gone, when the weeping had stilled to sobs, nna was not as she had been a half-hour before.

For the first time she saw herself clearly, saw the folly, the oolishness of her dreams, how unreal they had been.

Randall would never marry her.

She was nothing but a servant-girl with a bastard bairn, ithout power, without prospects and without hope of redemption from the humdrum toll of days that she must spend in ondage to her humble origins.

She stayed out until almost dusk and then, chastened and ilent, trailed miserably back to the kitchen to feed her son nd eat supper with the Sinclairs.

ive pounds was the cost of the burial, in addition to the uinea fee that Reverend Ferrie, minister of Rutherford and lacket, demanded for the 'kirk box' from families that were ot members of his congregation.

It was all done with great speed. Jock Bennet's body was in he ground less than twenty-four hours after his demise. The orpse was kept overnight in the lantern hut at the back of the bbeyfield's stables and was dressed and confined to its coffin here. The coffin, and the grave-marker, were made to pattern y pit carpenters who charged a standard fee for the items. homas Rance made all the arrangements and penned a ryptic report for the manager, Mr Bolderon. Snippets Smith otalled John Bennet's take to the day of his death, paid out what was owing to his son, closed the entry in the ledger with the terse comment *Died by Accident*, signed and dated.

There was no 'official' enquiry, no investigation. Davy Bennet's tearful account was taken at face value, though Mr Rance took the precaution of ordering Willie Ogilvie along the narrow tunnel to check the shoring and make sure that the slump which had killed Bennet did not presage a running fault in the overlay.

Ogilvie did not much care for the duty, particularly as there was blood smeared here and there on the floor of the tunnel and a nasty puddle of the stuff outside Bennet's room. He made his examination at the double, found no evidence of cracking and returned the message that all was tight before he crawled back under his shelf to finish off his shift.

The portion of ground allotted to colliers, though consecrated, was distinct and separate from the parish kirkyard, a sloping spur of unkempt grassland divided by a road from the last resting-place of respectable members of the community, those who were not miners. There were few stones. The markers were mainly of wood, solid and deep-dug and branded with just enough information to keep record, for a while, of the men and women who had lived and died on and under the Abbeyfield. Burned-black letters, cramped and abbreviated, on weathered wood, told no tales at all.

John Bennet's first wife was buried west of Alloa, on scrubland by the old Crabbe pit. His second wife rested only ten yards from the slot picked out for Jock. Her grave was weedy and unflowered and the wooden cross had a tilt to it, for Jock had never visited the place from the day he put her down. Now he had joined them both, and if there was hymn-singing in Heaven at the meeting in eternal bliss of a man and his wives no whisper crept across the steel-grey waters of the Forth or drifted with the smoke from the coal pit's shafts.

Reverend Ferrie lifted the deceased's name from a hand-printed note, and mentioned it only twice. He intoned a long prayer, which he had off by heart, and read verse after verse from the Book of Numbers, all about hosts and tabernacles, which made no sense at all in the context of a burial service.

No psalms were sung and the old man from Rutherford kirk huffled forward with his spade the moment the *Amen* was uttered.

It was day-shift time, mid-morning, so there were no colliers at the graveside. They were all below ground howking out heir daily bread. Jock would not have expected them to acrifice a valuable hour to pay respects to a man whose ability o earn had been reduced to zero. Present by the grave were Davy, Snippets and Mr Rance, while Sarah, Mouse and Elspeth watched from beyond the wall.

Mouse wept and wept. She had wept incessantly through most of the night and her grief grated now, a little, on Elspeth's nerves. Sarah, however, had shed no tears at all and that concerned Elspeth more than Mouse's incessant blubbing. Several times she had tried to put an arm about the girl but Sarah, even now, would have none of it and shook off 'Pet's consolations.

It was towards the end of the reading that the horseman came trotting down the road. The sound of the hoofs distracted he girls. They turned their heads and Mouse, without drying up, dug her elbow into Elspeth's hip, leaned and hissed, "It's Mr Bolderon."

Clearly Keir Bolderon had not intended to attend the hewer's funeral. He had inadvertently intruded upon it while iding from his house to the pit. At first he was nonplussed. He reined the horse, tried to back the animal but could not and, with the girls' eyes upon him, slipped from the saddle, ied the rein to a gatepost and, removing his hat, tiptoed down o join the females at the wall.

He said nothing until Reverend Ferrie had concluded his benediction and the old man had unshouldered his spade, then he came a step towards the three girls, hat held across his hest and a look of sincere condolence upon his face.

He addressed himself to Elspeth.

"You are . . . ?"

"Elspeth Patterson, Mr Bolderon."

"His wife, poor chap?"

"The – the servant, sir. But these are his children."

"Of course. It's Bennet, is it not?"

Neither Mouse nor Sarah could find voice to reply.

Elspeth answered, "Jock Bennet, Mr Bolderon. He was killed yesterday by a coal fall in the base seam."

"I believe I have the—Yes, Mr Rance did inform me."

For a moment the manager did not appear to know what to do or say. He shifted his weight uncomfortably from foot to foot and looked down at the ground, then he dug into his pocket and fished out his purse.

Mouse, her tiny face wet and swollen, stopped crying as Mr Bolderon opened the purse and took out two crowns. The coins were not common, big round objects which seemed more valuable, more real than banknotes.

He gave them to Elspeth, laying them gently on her palm and then, impulsively, lifted them again and bestowed one each on Sarah and on Mouse; then, and this was the queerest thing, he stepped forward and, hat still in hand, kissed Mouse and Sarah, each upon the brow.

Without warning, Sarah began to cry.

Mr Bolderon cleared his throat, turned, put on his hat, and to Elspeth said, "God be with the children," and hurried off to have words with Thomas Rance who was leading Davy up to the gate, a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"He gave me five shillin's," said Mouse, in awe. 'Mr Bolderon himsel' gave me five shillin's. What did he give you, Sarah?"

Sarah did not answer her sister.

Weeping inconsolably, Sarah had turned and fled.

When one thought of banks and bankers the names of the Falkirk Farmers' and Gilbert Bontine did not immediately leap to the mind. The fact was that Gibbie was no more proficient in the science of managing money than he had been in the art of managing land.

Provincial banking-houses continued to pop up – and pop down – all over the place to meet the demand for credit to oil the wheels of progress. Soreheads predicted a decline now that the war was over and it was rumoured that one of the Farmers' competitors, the Falkirk Union, was seriously over-extended and dependent upon a good harvest in the Strath to pull it through financial crisis. Gibbie paid no heed to such rumours. He had two active, on-the-spot partners to do the fretting for him and they did not seem in the slightest concerned. Gibbie was so engrossed in the 'habiliments' of banking that he was blind and deaf to its real issues.

Originally he had purchased the partnership from old Nigel Summerhays. Angus Hildebrand had made enquiries into the standing of the Farmers', had heard that it was steady if not scintillating, and had given the nod to the purchase. Gibbie had told Randall that the price of the partnership was seven thousand pounds, the bulk of his inheritance from his father. In truth the partnership had cost him twelve thousand. Alicia had come up with the extra five thousand in savings accumulated through legacies from aunts and uncles over the years, since she was an only child in a family not much given to breeding. Alicia had willingly sunk her personal fortune into banking. It seemed to be such a secure, respectable, infallible profession, ideally suited to her husband's temperament and to her social aspirations.

The partners numbered three. In addition to Gibbie there were two brothers, Francis and Alfred Pryde. They had founded the bank back in 1787 and knew the ins and outs of the local trade down to the last brown farthing. Long before it had become fashionable to do so they had financed store farmers and cattle-jobbers from booths at all the fairs and trysts and markets within a day's ride of Falkirk. They boasted to Gilbert that they had 'invented' the 50-day loan and refined the note-of-credit system and had never been cheated by a jobber or a drover in all their long years in the business. Even the gullible Gibbie took these tales with a pinch of salt.

In addition to stirring a much-needed twelve thousand pounds into the Prydes' emptying pot, Gilbert brought an illusion of stability to the company. It was assumed by depositors that Bontine lands were now 'behind' the bank, though Randall would have been spitted and roasted before he would have guaranteed Gibbie's venture on a formal basis. However, Randall did become a client of the bank, as part of his bargain with Gibbie for taking Anna off his hands. Sir Randall Bontine was the Falkirk Farmers' only landowner of any scale and he was heavily borrowed on the £1,000 line of credit that his brother allowed him. The Prydes seemed unconcerned by fraternal generosity and by the small sums that Gibbie personally borrowed to enhance his property at Strachan.

If Weaver Moodie had suspected that the Falkirk Farmers' was in a precarious position or that Gibbie did not know what he was doing, mad or not Moodie would not have chosen that little company as a depository for his all-important fund. Nobody, not Hildebrand, not Randall and certainly not Gilbert, warned Moodie off. Nobody had an inkling that the Pryde brothers were sinking gradually into debt and that one per cent interest on a 50-day loan had become, in inflationary times, a formula not for continued success but for inevitable disaster.

In the past, before Elspeth had run off, Gilbert had tried without success to persuade Moodie to bank with him. James did not trust banks very much at the best of times and preferred to divide his accounts between two rock-solid, old-established institutions, namely the Royal Bank of Scotland and the British Linen Company. But he had heeded Hildebrand's advice, felt that he could trust Young Gilbert in much the same manner as he had trusted Old Gilbert, and had plumped in the end for a convenient solution. The fund, worth eleven thousand pounds, promised a fixed return of three per cent interest per annum.

The Prydes were overwhelmed. They showered Gibbie with praise, treated him to a lavish dinner at the Market Tavern and convinced him that he was a banker born. Gibbie believed every word of it. He preened and swaggered and did not spare a thought for Moodie's intention or the weaver's reasons for selling off his investments in the first place.

Randall was no quicker off the mark. If he had not been quite so involved with Suzanne Seaton and the Ottershaw Ball he might have speculated with more attention upon Jamie Moodie's odd manoeuvres. As it was he not only neglected to discuss the implications with Gibbie but did not even raise the subject with Angus Hildebrand. He simply complied with the lawyer's polite request that he present himself at the Reverend Eshner's manse at ten o'clock on the morning of May 2nd to serve as witness to the signing by Moodie of a whole bundle of documents related to inheritance. Randall assumed that Jamie Moodie had at last lifted himself out of the slough of despond and had decided to change his will to match the change in his circumstances.

James was grim and uncommunicative during the legal proceeding which, shorn of all social frills, lasted less than a quarter of an hour. Indeed, Randall was back out of the manse and trotting home to Ottershaw almost before he knew it. Eshner had notarised, Randall witnessed and Moodie had signed each of the documents that Hildebrand had put upon the table; and that had been that.

Randall had been somewhat shocked by Jamie Moodie's appearance. The man was so torn down that he might have been suffering a leaking wound of the body and not of the soul. But Randall had too many light-hearted things to occupy him, not least the finalising of arrangements for the Ottershaw Ball, to dwell long on the strange affairs of the weaver mannie.

The May Ball, to the laird's astonishment, had become a major enterprise and a sensation in the Lennox. Every tuppenny-ha'penny tenant farmer and his wife seemed to be scheming for an invitation and tinpot traders from as far away as Duntocher took to dropping in to bid him fond greeting and to remind him that they had once done a bit of business with his father. If it had not been for Suzanne's excited amusement, and her support, Randall would have been irritated beyond measure by the pettiness of it all. But he had started it and flung himself into it in great good humour.

So Randall Bontine too spared no thought for Jamie Moodie who, after all the papers were signed and legally sealed, vanished once more behind the walls of Moss House and settled, almost impatiently, to wait for the season's first big rain to flood the Kennart lades.

FIVE

The Ottershaw Ball

When they returned from the burial Elspeth gathered the Bennets about the table for a midday meal. Mary Jean had been put into the care of benevolent Nessie Herbert and her big dozy daughter, Meg, and would be safe enough at the minders' cottage for a while. The cottage seemed peculiarly empty without Jock Bennet. His scant possessions were still evident in the kitchen, trousers on a peg, boots by the hearth, tobacco pipe lying, like a fossil, on the shelf. She had no great feeling of grief for the dead collier. She was more concerned for the welfare of his children.

Blotchy and scowling, Mouse crouched on a stool, drank tea from a bowl but refused to be tempted by slices of buttered bread or cuts of pickled ham. Sarah ate daintily, solemnly, her crying fit behind. Taking his father's chair, Davy wolfed into the food as usual.

"Have you given any thought to what you'll do now?" Elspeth began.

"What's it got to do wi' you?" Mouse demanded. "You're not our mam."

"Would you like me to leave?" said Elspeth.

Sarah answered, "No."

"Davy?" said Elspeth.

"I canna stop you if you've a mind t' take t' the bloody road again," the boy answered.

"That is the last thing I want t' do," said Elspeth. "At least I have work here."

"There's no work," said Mouse, "now Daddy's gone."

"We'll not even have a roof over our heads much longer," said Davy. "Rance'll want this house for a hewer."

"It's time to see how much money we have," said Elspeth. "I can put seventy shillin's into the purse. Mousie?"

"I've nothin'."

"Liar," Davy said. "You've the five shillin' Bolderon gave ye."

"That's mine."

"Hand it over."

Sarah slid on to the table the crown that Mr Bolderon had given her. "See, there's my share."

"Fork it out, Mousie," Davy commanded.

Quick though she was, Mouse failed to escape Davy's fist. He snared her by the neck and pushed her face down almost to the table, while she cried out, "Mine, it's mine, I tell ye."

Davy said, "Daddy's no' here t' spoil you, now. Do what Elspeth tells ye or ye'll have to answer t' me."

Mouse pushed the crown piece on to the table and Davy released her. Elspeth expected her to burst into floods of tears and rush from the cottage but the girl did not fly into a tantrum. She sat upright, scarlet-cheeked, dry-eyed, and glared at her brother.

"How bloody much can *you* put in, Davy?" Mouse cried.

"Forty-three shillin's. It's the lyin' money that Snippets costed," Davy said. "The carpenter's fee has already been took from it."

Sarah said, "Daddy kept money under the bed."

"What?" said Davy.

"Where?" said Mouse.

"Hid under the long board," said Sarah.

On his knees, Davy butted the wooden bedstead to one side. He prised up the loose board and dug out a greasy buckram parcel tied with twine. He unwrapped it to reveal ten guinea pieces. Davy handed them to Elspeth who put them on the table.

"How much is that all told?" said Mousie.

"Sixteen pounds an' twelve shillings," said Elspeth.

"That's less than five weeks' take," said Davy.

"Will Mr Rance let us stay here if we pay the rent?" said Elspeth.

"Nah, he'll want the cottage for a hewer," said Davy. "But never mind. He'll have his hewer. I'll cut the damned stuff."

"Davy, you canna," said Elspeth.

Hands on hips, Davy declared, "I can cut from the hidden seam."

His sisters, it seemed, were struck dumb. Their father had died in the fissure and, so Elspeth imagined, they were frightened of it.

"I'll cut an' you pair can haul," Davy said. "I'll not draw as much as Daddy in a shift but it'll bring us twice the wage all four o' us can earn labourin' upstairs."

Mouse stared at Davy with a shining look of admiration, animosity forgotten.

Davy went on, "When I get my full growth I'll bring in bigger hauls. Meantime there's a fair stack o' great coal cut already."

Elspeth could see that Davy revelled in the prospect of being the family's breadwinner. She did not doubt that he had skill enough to take coal from the millstone seam but she questioned if he had the stamina to last out a shift.

"Tell me, Davy," she said, "how much we might make from fixed-rate employments, the four of us."

"At most," said Davy, "forty-two shillin's."

"Why should we scrape when yon seam's drippin' wi' fat coal?" said Mouse.

"Because the millstone seam's dangerous," said Elspeth.

"Nah, yon seam's safe as a feather bed," said Davy.

"Did it not kill your daddy?" said Elspeth.

"Daddy kilt himself," Davy declared.

"But the roof fell –" Elspeth began.

"It wasn't the bloody roof; it was the wall."

"What difference—"

"Daddy chalked too heavy a cut," Davy stated. "Daddy made a mistake – an' paid the price."

"Davy, how can you slander him so?" said Elspeth.

"It's true, it's true," put in Mouse, taking her brother's part.

"Listen," said Davy. "Coal's hangin' from yon bloody wall; if we don't take it down some other lucky bugger will."

Barely a day ago Elspeth had regarded Davy Bennet as a victim of a system which made no allowance for weakness. But Davy – Mouse too – had always known what she had not –

that the system had been shaped for them and by them and that misfortune would not alter it a jot.

Sensing her indecision, Davy said, "Look, it's our seam. We found it. I'm the man in this household an' it's my say what we do wi' it. You labour for me, Patterson, or ye toddle."

Elspeth said, "I'll support you, Davy, if you're set on this course. But I'll not go alone to put the case to Thomas Rance."

Davy cocked his head, squinted at her without boyishness. His eyes were pale and fierce. "Christ, woman, it's not what I want. It's what has t' be."

"Go tonight," Mouse urged. "See Mr Rance tonight. We can all be down below tomorrow."

"Aye, why waste a workin' day?" said Davy.

Elspeth recalled the sideling seam beneath the trap. She thought of the great slab of fallen coal beneath which Jock Bennet had been pinned and realised that Davy would tackle it first. Bloodied though it was, Davy would break it up and Mouse and she would haul it to the surface piece by piece; and be paid for it, blood and all.

"Very well," said Elspeth.

Mouse laughed. "Can I have my crown back?"

Magnanimously Davy said, "Why not, Mouse, why not?"

At five that evening Thomas Rance met the delegation from the collier's cottage. He listened to their plea to upgrade Davy to hewer and stoically agreed to put him on trial for two months. The following morning the Bennets went back to work. Elspeth accompanied them, obedient not to reason but to tradition, and its destiny.

Sandy Sinclair was the one person at Strachan who suspected that Anna's passivity might bode mischief. Everybody else seemed delighted that she had been humbled and wasted no opportunity of reminding her of her precarious position at the castle now that Randall was on the verge of taking himself a wife.

As it was high season for farming, Sandy, out in fields and gardens from dawn until dusk, could not defend Anna against taunts. Besides, he had a new acquisition to attend to, a fine, five-year-old Clydesdale that Sandy had named Absalom. More by accident than design Mr Gibbie had got a bargain in the young plough-horse. Though its colour was bad and its coat uneven, Absalom had a good head, a light carcase and deep legs. Once Sandy had broken him to the plough he pulled true and strong. What little pockets of time Sandy had left after the long day's labour, however, he devoted to a study of Anna's plight, puzzled by her responses. Not once did she spit back at Catriona or Edith Simmons when they jeered her; nor did she complain when, of an evening, Mistress Alicia summoned her to the sewing-room to 'approve' of the ball gown that was being created stitch by stitch or to admire all other feminine appurtenances that were gathered to equip the lady for a voyage about the halls of Ottershaw on the night of the May Ball. Sandy watched and listened. He did not believe that Anna had bowed to the inevitable. The 'glaze' in her eye was like that of a pony before it stamped and lashed out at you with its sharp wee hoof.

One night, towards the middle of the month, Sandy was wakened from sleep by the snickering of horses in the stable. Experience told him it would be nothing more threatening than a rat on the manger but, mindful of his charges, he sighed, rolled out of his blankets and, wrapped in his nightshirt, stole out of the house and across the yard.. Absalom, sleepy too, blinked at the young man's lantern with drooping lids and gave a stamp with his rear hoof to show that he was well enough. Sandy glanced about the stall, found no sharp object in the straw, no smoulder. He dabbed the Clydesdale's nose with his brow. Absalom responded with a *wuffle* and a nod. After checking the carriage horse and trap pony, Sandy blew out the lantern and returned, shivering, to the house. He was on his way to his cubby when he caught the whisper of Anna's voice from the corridor.

Robbie had been fretful all day with a rheumy sort of cold that would not ripen. Though it was dark in the servants' hall Sandy padded to the kitchen and poured warm water from the day's kettle into a glass. He added a single spoonful of whisky from the stone jar under the pot rack, a touch of brown sugar from the tub, and carried the glass back along the corridor. As he approached the wall-press that formed the angle of her bed place, he heard Anna croon to her bairn. He hesitated.

"So they'll not let us go, will they not?" Anna said in a purring whisper. "Well, never fear, m' wee mannie, Mam'll go without permission. It's your place Mammy'll save for you, Robbie."

Hardly daring to breathe, Sandy stood stock still.

"I'll be there for Randall, for your dear daddy," Anna went on, "an' none o' them will stop me."

Deliberately Sandy coughed.

"Who's that?"

"Sandy."

"What d'you want?"

"I brought the bairn a drink."

"Oh! Fetch it here then."

Sandy went forward to the bed. "Can he not find sleep?"

"It's just a cold," said Anna.

Whispering made it intimate, though Sandy was chilled and longed for a candle to give an impression of warmth. He groped and found the bed end.

"Where are ye, Anna?"

"Here." Her hand touched his arm.

Sandy flinched.

"Will I light the—" he began.

"No," Anna said. "I can see well enough."

Her warm plump hand clasped his fingers and carefully removed the glass.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Whisky in warm water. My sister Morven used t' make it for me when I was small," Sandy answered.

Robbie was more than half asleep. Sandy listened to the creak of bed slats, the rustle of the mattress, smelled Anna's warmth, like musk.

"See what Sandy brought for you," she crooned. "Come on, m' wee mannie, drink it up."

Robbie gave a splutter and a cough. Sandy heard the child gulp, sigh when the glass was taken from his lips.

"Is he all right, Anna?"

"Aye. He'll cuddle down wi' me in a minute."

"I'll go back t' bed then."

"Aye."

"Anna?"

"What?"

"Concernin' Ottershaw—"

She was suddenly tense, Sandy sensed.

He said, "I'd take you t' the ball if I could. But I'm t' drive Mr Gibbie and Mistress Alicia in the gig."

"I know."

"Anna?"

"What is it?"

"I'll – I'll tell ye all about it when I come home."

Her hand brushed his thigh. He stepped back at once. She found his hand, gave it a tug and brought him down to her. He could not understand why she could see so clearly in the darkness while he was almost blind. Robbie's knees, Anna's breast, the hard rim of the drinking-glass; Sandy bent, guided down. Her lips touched his cheek and then his mouth. She kissed him briefly, rewarded him for his kindness.

"There!" she said. "Now, off t'your bed, Sandy Sinclair."

For an hour thereafter Sandy tossed and twisted under his blanket and tried vainly to find a position in which his excitement and apprehension would settle and let him find sleep. He had heard her confession, learned of her strategy. He acknowledged with sorrow that Anna was possessed beyond reason by love of the laird.

Come Friday night, the night of the ball, shame might scrape the Sinclairs again – unless Anna could be dissuaded from her intention, unless, somehow, he could stop her reaching her goal.

All day long the sun blazed out of a cloudless sky. It westered reluctantly without losing much of its warmth. All across the shires leaves unfurled and grass grew and, in the park of Ottershaw, stretched green and springy as a carpet new-bought for the great occasion.

Horses in the shafts of delivery carts were lathered with foam on their arrival and champed impatiently while kegs and sacks were off-loaded and goods dispersed on Mr Hunter's instructions. Clad in his second-best 'browns', sleeves rolled up and apron billowing, the steward spent the best part of the morning in the yards, pointing this way and that, like a weathercock gone mad, running indoors every now and again to stir the servants into a frenzy of confusion. Nobody could remember old Henry ever being in such a state of 'decomposition'. It was feared he might not last the pace, might keel over and have to be dragged away like a side of beef and hung to cool in the long larder. By mid-afternoon, however, old Henry had found his second wind. In donning the brand-new red coat, with its big gilt buttons and gold-cord frogging, snow-white breeks and black pumps with silver buckles, he donned again his dignity. When Mrs Lacy set the powdered wig upon the steward's head an almost lordly calm descended with it, and Hunter was ready to sally forth to greet the conveyances that would soon trundle down from the gates.

Dunn too had a new uniform, fancy enough to swell his bantam arrogance and drive him, strutting, in and out of everywhere when he should have been upstairs ready to answer his master's call. Cornered in the stillroom, where girls fetched n from Balnesmoor were being instructed in the art of washing glassware, Dunn had his lugs cuffed by Mrs Lacy and, crimson with humiliation, was sent packing to annoy Sir Randall in preference to the industrious citizens of the servants' hall.

Immediately after luncheon Suzanne Seaton had retired behind locked doors to bathe and primp and pirouette, to revel n indecisions about 'finishing touches' to her ball gown which, n keeping with the tone of the occasion, was decked across he skirt with a stitching of tiny green leaves and had a hem-line hat, in Suzanne's opinion, swagged too close to the ground to how her four-guinea slippers to best advantage. Walter enoyed every minute of the day's frantic preparations. With a cheroot stuck in his mouth, thumbs hooked into his vest pockets, he sauntered about the halls and yards scattering suggestions' as he went. Eventually he gravitated to the long restles in the ground-floor drawing-room and gave vital assisance in tapping casks and uncorking bottles.

The sun was still well above the trees when the first guests arrived, in a four-wheeled, nondescript carriage. The well-to-do wool grower from Gartmore was accompanied by his wife, ister and two trembling daughters. By six o'clock the patch f grassland reserved for conveyances was packed with open arriages, closed coaches, disguised carts, the Reverend Eshner's 'scriptural chariot', and six or seven aristocratic heavy-weights fitted out with plush squabs and flutes of emerald hammer-cloth. When the carriages were staked and horses uncoupled, watered and fed, drivers and footboys congregated outside the old pig rows, and ate meat pies, supped good ale and prattled and gossiped like rooks. On the old drying-lawn, between the mansion and the grieve's house, trestles had been erected and lanterns poled and, later in the evening, there would be games and dancing for servants too.

Ottershaw's staircases turned into waterfalls of silk and satin as women and girls ascended to and descended from the cloakrooms which Randall had set aside for their use. Fussy little ladies'-maids buzzed among the throng while husbands gathered in the long hall to keep a weather eye upon the staircases in case they failed to recognise their dames after transformation.

There had been no social event at Ottershaw for more than thirty years and it appeared that Sir Randall was bent on making good the deficit in the course of a single night. Claret Cup and Negus shimmered in four huge silver chalices so deep and broad that, in the opinion of experts, you might drown a bullock in any one of them. Champagne fizzed to delight young misses and provincial bucks, to whom the very foam tasted of romance. Fiery spirits were dispensed in the gunroom, from which all the guns had been removed, of course. Here hard-bitten men to whom drink was the only worthwhile entertainment congregated out of harm's way to tipple and roar and patronisingly mock their host.

In an alcove at the nether end of the hall an orchestra of bewigged musicians, imported at fabulous cost from Glasgow, played sweetly in tempo while another group, less couth, strummed and chirruped in a tented booth under the elms of the park. One might take one's pick, indulge in a little 'scandalous' waltzing or a breathless *alfresco* strathspey. Some did one thing, some another – it was surprising who chose to do what – and some guests just sat about and basked in the roseate glow of being in Ottershaw at all.

Randall did not greet his guests upon their arrival. He waited nervously in his chamber, kitted in the latest solid cloth, in breeches that clung without a wrinkle to his calves and thighs. He heard the hubbub grow, the larksong of girls on the landings, the strains of the orchestra from the hall below, and he held himself from his guests by sheer effort of will. Dunn poured him whisky and water. He sipped it slowly, watching the clock tick away the minutes until it was exactly half past six, then he rose, tweaked down his lapel, and sent Dunn along to enquire of Mistress Seaton's maid and Mr Seaton's man if they supposed that mistress and master might be ready to join him on an assault on Fort Society. One minute later Walter appeared in the doorway to inform Randall that his sister would be but another ten minutes or so as eight hours had not proved sufficient time to put a polish on perfection.

In due course Suzanne too was ready. The laird and the Seatons descended the main stairs. Guests flocked from everywhere to cast an eye over the laird's woman, flabbergasted at how regal a pair they made, arm in arm, the brother bringing up the rear like a grand vizier. Bowing to ladies, Randall escorted Miss Seaton into the dining-room where folk expanded to make an arena for them, and folk outside bustled into the hall in expectation of words of welcome from the provider of the feast. Randall did not disappoint them.

Naturally he made no mention of the pagan nature of a festivity of mischiefs and Anglo-Saxon rites. Randall Bontine was a Scot and canny. He knew that he was 'on show', that his reputation, and his 'calling price', would rise if he did well. Consequently his speech was short and pithy. He introduced his guests to his friends and neighbours, fulsomely praised the honest families of the Lennox, noted their douceness and generosity, mentioned his father in passing, threw in a couple of French phrases to appeal to the nobility and concluded by spreading his hands as if to show that there were no blind cards up his sleeve.

"Tonight let us revel together, like the good friends we are," he declared. "My house is your house."

There was applause, even cries of, "Aye, you're a grand lad, Bontine," from someone who had been at the brandy.

Randall signalled the orchestra to strike up and swirled Suzanne on his hand around and away into the hall. He was followed by couples of similar disposition and the ball was at last under way.

* * *

Alicia squinted at her brother-in-law and his partner venomously. She felt slighted by the fact that she had not been singled out for an introduction to the Seatons.

"She's a child, Gilbert," she hissed, "a mere child."

"Hardly, my dear," Gibbie answered. "To my way of thinkin', Miss Seaton is very much a woman."

Before Alicia could demand an explanation and fulminate a quarrel, Walter Seaton appeared and with considerable diplomacy begged Gibbie to introduce his beautiful lady wife. Appeased, Alicia simpered and was duly invited to perform a Highland Lilt with the honoured guest.

Proficient in all fashionable steps Walter did not twirl Alicia like a drover's rope nor prance about her as if she was a maypole. He *danced* with her. No man, not even her husband, had danced with Alicia Bontine in many a moon. Alicia was transported back to her days as the belle of the assembly rooms where Mr Clissack, her dancing-master, had called her his 'ethereal sprite' and stolen a kiss from her maidenly cheek. With but one hand to guide her, Walter Seaton led Alicia back in time. He made her feel young again, a feat without equal in the history of the two-step.

Gibbie watched his wife and Seaton for a while then wandered away to find a bite to eat. Travelling in warm May sunshine had sharpened his appetite and at the supper tables he loaded a platter with succulent viands and dipped a glass in the silver bowl. He was about to tuck in when a dry voice behind him said, "Well, Mr Gilbert, I trust Mistress Seaton has dowry enough to pay for such a splendid affair."

Robert Rudge had been invited in his employer's stead to represent Kennart. Though Gibbie had never had much time for Rudge he had to admit that the remark showed perspicacity.

Rudge added, "Or is Ottershaw doin' so well out of cattle and timber that Randall must lavish it away on parties?"

In fact Gibbie had been taken aback at the scale of the affair and had been trying to calculate the cost of it. Randall had already drawn close to the limit of his credit at the Farmers' Bank; Gibbie prayed that he was not going to ask for more. How had Rudge guessed it?

Rudge winked. "I would take the delightful Miss Seaton without a farthing to her name, though, or a stitch to her back."

Anxious to disengage himself from the manager Gibbie put a question of his own. "How is your master?"

"Gone in the head."

"I heard he was somewhat recovered of late."

"He toys with business, aye. But I would hardly say that he's himself again," Rudge answered. "I doubt if we'll see him at Kennart again."

"A sad condition." Gibbie inched towards the door, platter in one hand, glass in the other.

"Why do you put the question to me, Mr Gilbert, when you have been transactin' business face-to-face with Mr Moodie?" said Robert Rudge.

So that was it. There were no secrets in the small world of Balnesmoor. Obviously Rudge had got wind of the private visit to Moss House. Naturally the manager was concerned about what James Moodie was up to, yet he, Gilbert, resented the manager's assumption that he would be indiscreet enough to discuss confidential transactions.

"I've nothing to say, Mr Rudge."

"Give me an opinion, Mr Gilbert. Do *you* believe that Jamie's mended in the head?"

"I see no reason to assume that Mr Moodie has permanently lost his capabilities," said Gibbie cautiously.

"Lawyers, bankers, inventories," said Rudge. "It has occurred to my agent, John Scarf, and to myself that Jamie might be on the verge of sellin' out."

"I doubt it."

"Is it not that kind of transaction?"

"Ah!" Gibbie exclaimed. "I do believe I spy my wife by the door. You must excuse me, Mr Rudge."

Alicia had indeed appeared in the doorway of the supper room. Still bearing his platter of cold cuts and his glass, Gibbie hurried to join her.

"For me, Gilbert?" Alicia said.

Gibbie glanced at plate and glass. "What? Yes, of course."

"Put them on that little table. I will partake in due course."

"Are you not hungry, Alicia?"

"Dance with me, Gilbert."

"Dance?"

"A quadrille."

"Do we not require three couples for a quadrille?"

"I have assembled them in the hall." Alicia seemed flushed and strange. "Give me your arm, my dearest."

Gibbie craved food and drink, not involvement in the complicated sections of a dance which he had dismally failed to master in his youth. Alicia would not be denied. Resignedly Gibbie presented his arm and Alicia dragged him into the hall. Gibbie was baffled by his wife's eagerness to join the fray. Alicia, however, wanted to dance, to dance and dance the night away. She had been infected by music and candlelight, by Walter Scaton's charm. She longed to feel as light and lithe and free as she had done before; but with Gilbert as partner the feeling was not the same, not the same at all. She felt as she usually felt these days – frumpish and matronly.

In the course of the quadrille much of Alicia's bitterness returned. The gaiety of the other dancers seemed to mock her loss of Ottershaw and with it her youth.

She twined her arm clumsily with her husband's waist and as they came together, hissed, "Gilbert, I want to go home."

"What? Now?"

"Yes, now."

But even Gibbie had his baulking point. He would not risk giving rise to rumours of a rift in the Bontine family by sweeping out of the ball before it had properly begun.

Husband and wife parted; met again.

"No, Alicia," he whispered.

"I want—"

"Alicia," Gibbie snapped. "Be still."

To his surprise, Alicia obeyed him and said no more about leaving for some hours.

The beef pie was filled with a jelly flavoured with onions and black pepper. When Sandy bit into it the crust flaked away and gravy ran down his chin. He ate with relish in spite of his vow not to become entangled in servants' revels but to remain watchful in case Anna came early.

He pushed the remainder of the pie into his mouth, wiped his chin and lifted his tankard of ale from the bench under the boughs of the big chestnut tree.

A freckled coach-boy from Duntreath, who had not returned to the stables with the Edmonstones' carriage but had stayed behind to enjoy himself, also polished off a pie. He squinted at Sandy.

"Ahoy, Sinclair! What did Gibbie come in?" he asked.

"Gig," Sandy replied.

"I thought Gibbie was rich. Has he no' got a proper carriage?"

"The gig has a hood," said Sandy.

The footman to Mr William Deare of Finster joined the pair. He sniggered. "It must've been a tight squeeze wi' the three o' you in a gig."

"Aye," said the coach-boy. "Were ye sittin' on Alicia's lap, Sinclair?"

Sandy had known them for years. They had schooled together at Balfron. Unruffled by their remarks he grinned. "It would be a bold lad who'd sit on the Mistress Alicia, I'll tell ye, Billy."

"Where's yon brother o' yours?" Colin, the footman, demanded.

"I've no notion," said Sandy.

"Have they no' strung him up yet?"

Sandy's fingers tightened on the tankard. He had had little contact with the lads from the village since the Sinclairs had moved to Strachan Castle, since Matt had fled from the Riding Officers on the night of the Kennart murders. The 'wonder' of that event was not so far into the past, however, that it had been forgotten in Balnesmoor and Ottershaw.

"Aye," put in freckled Billy, "I'm fair amazed the rogue's left free t' roam about the country, slittin' throats as the fancy takes him."

"I heard," said Colin, "it was the laird let him off the hook an' handed him the stallion."

"I know nothin' about it," said Sandy gruffly.

"I heard," said Colin, "the laird let Matt go because he was puttin' it t' Anna Sinclair but never wantit t' get saddled wi' her.

"Shut your mouth," Sandy recommended.

"Who's puttin' it to her now, Sandy, eh?"

"Aye, who's got the leg o'er the lairdie's mare these days?"

Sandy did not appear to move. He flicked his wrist, that was all. A sheet of ale splashed full into Colin's leering visage and tailed across Billy's chest.

"Well, well! That's careless o' me," Sandy said, the empty tankard swinging in his fist.

"Bastard!" Colin cried. "See what you've done t' my tunic."

They could have taken him in tandem, footman and coach-boy, but something in Sandy's manner dissuaded them. Besides, other male servants, gathered by the ale keg, thought it a great joke.

"Miss your mouth, did ye, Colin?"

"How could ye miss such a wide mark?"

"Aye, Mr Deare should have clothed him in oilcloth."

A general air of good humour smothered the possibility of a brawl. Sandy dropped the tankard to the grass and, not hurrying, walked off into the trees.

Freckled Billy shouted, "Dinna touch him, man. He's Matt Sinclair's brother; he'll shove a blade in your guts quick as wink."

Sandy felt no loyalty to Matt. He had no need to protect the honour of such a black sheep. He stooped under the boughs of the chestnut tree on to the path that led to Pine Cottage. In that place in the dank wood Matt and Anna had lived as man and wife. It was occupied again. Sandy did not approach too close. Sheltered by brushy pines he looked at the dwelling's pale walls and the chimney's scut of smoke and wondered what it would be like to live here with Anna, wedded to Anna. After a minute of contemplation he returned to the paddock by the north gate to keep watch for her. At all costs he must prevent Anna reaching the ballroom and making a fool of herself before the laird.

As evening gave way to night the air became cool and sweet. Stars pricked the darkness. A piece of moon shed more light than it should have done, as if the heavens too predicted bounty for the laird and his love. Hospitable duty done Randall danced with Suzanne Seaton in the warmth of the hall and stole moments alone with her in garden corners.

In the trees around the parkland much flirting and kissing was going on, more serious wooing too.

In the gunroom boozers had sunk into roaring carousal, with coats discarded and vests unbuttoned.

In the drawing-room Alicia was complaining about the heat and insisting that Gibbie accompany her on to the terrace and do a bit of fetch-and-carry, bringing her wine and her lace shawl, her reticule and fan from the hall and, finally, because she was hungry now, a dish of pickled lambs' tongues.

Fiddlers had been coaxed from the park to the drying-lawn where a servants' jig was in full swing. Most of the lovers had come indoors, giving over the park and the terrace to couples who, oblivious to the chill, were 'lost in each other's eyes'.

Randall and Suzanne stood by the balustrade sipping wine from crystal glasses. The moment at last arrived when the soldier-laird must play the role of suitor and do what was expected of him.

"Now that you have seen them gathered," Randall said, "do you care for the folk of Ottershaw?"

"They have shown me their friendship in a thousand ways."

"Do you suppose that you might find life here agreeable?"

"That would depend," said Suzanne Seaton.

"Upon what?"

"Upon the nature of the person with whom I would share that life."

"If that person were not too old, not too spoiled, not too ugly—"

"Not too conceited," put in Suzanne.

"Yes, a very modest fellow indeed; what then?"

"I would expect him to put modesty aside, to show boldness."

"Pray go on," said Randall.

"I would expect him to—"

Suzanne's attention was diverted from the word game. She stared from the terrace into the lantern-dappled parkland. Randall released her hand, stepped close to the balustrade, leaned upon it and peered to the tree line.

"God in Heaven!" he exclaimed.

Suzanne moved to be close to him. "What is it, Randall? Who is that person?"

"I – I cannot be sure."

Suzanne knew that he was lying. Bewildered, she stepped back as if the hurrying figure on the pasture threatened her.

The woman hurried on, past lovers among the trees who seemed to shrink away from her, came on towards the terrace in an undeviating line like a creature drawn from the forest by the attraction of the lights.

"Randall, who is she?"

"She – she served here. Years ago."

"Is she mad?"

"No, she is not mad. She attends my brother at Strachan now."

"What is her name?"

"Anna. Anna Sinclair."

"Does she intend mischief, do you suppose?"

Randall put his arm about Suzanne's shoulder, turned her away from the balustrade and steered her towards the french doors.

"I think it would be as well if you went indoors for a little while, Suzanne."

"But why?"

"The girl – the girl is subject to – to fits."

Randall was lying again, lying without conviction. He left Suzanne within the doors, whirled and strode out. She lingered by the open door and started when a hand closed upon her arm.

"What's amiss, dearest?" Walter enquired.

"There's a person outside, some sort of servant."

"Been at the grog, has he?"

"It's a girl, a woman. Randall says she served here once."

Walter hesitated, said, "I'm confident Randall can cope with such trivial crises without our aid. Come inside. Let me close the doors."

"She – she's young."

"Suzanne, come inside."

"Yes, Walter."

Suzanne turned away. Whatever the appearance of the girl signified, whatever secrets she carried, Suzanne did not wish to be informed of them. She heard Walter close the tall doors and tap the iron bolt into place.

"Suzanne, will you favour me with a dance?"

"I would be delighted, dear brother," Suzanne answered, and sensibly moved away from sight of the terrace and the young, dark-haired intruder named Anna.

The park did not seem like the one she had ridden through on Sabre's back, clinging to Randall, one bright May morning three years ago. Ottershaw did not seem like Ottershaw. It was all garish and swollen and strange, alien, not enchanted. Its glamour was like a new fortification which Randall had built to exclude her. She was thirty yards from the steps when Randall emerged from the french doors. When he came down the steps on to the grass Anna experienced the joy and fear that had marked her connections with him in the past. She did not run to him, maintaining instead her brisk, efficient pace. Skirts held on her left hand, head up, the lace shawl she had stolen from Edith Simmons floated about her. Her kidskin pumps, carried from Strachan in her hand, were soaked with Ottershaw dew. It did not matter how she looked; she could not compete with the fine ladies that thronged the mansion. All that mattered was that Randall would be forced to acknowedge her in front of the gentlefolk of the Lennox, under the very nose of the lady from Piperhaugh. Randall must be taught that, powerful though he was, he could not be free of her, no matter how many lanterns he lighted in the trees.

Randall did not look the same. He was elegant and aristocratic in silks and faced cloth. His features were set hard. The scar on his lip created a deceiving smile, wry, not welcoming, as he waited by the bottom step, arms folded, for her to come to him, flushed, dishevelled and breathless. Doors to the hall were closed. Couples drifted from the terraces like wraiths. The laird, Anna realised, had put himself above scandal, above reproach. She had erred in coming here to Ottershaw in the hope of shaming him. Now Randall was not merely honourable; he was honoured.

Short of the steps, she halted. She opened her mouth to address Randall, to plead and berate him for his neglect.

A hand closed on her arm. She glanced to the side. Saw Sandy. Gave a tug. Felt Sandy's grip tighten unyieldingly.

"Anna," Randall said, "why have you come?"

"Why did you not invite me?"

"Because this is no place for you."

If there was anger in Randall Bontine he hid it well. He was not amused by her naivety, however, and his tone was hard and calm and polished.

"Young man, who are you?" he asked.

"Sinclair, sir."

"One of Lachlan's lot?"

"Aye, sir."

"Did you bring her here?"

"No, he did not," Anna cried. "I came on my own two feet."

She longed for Randall to command Sandy to release her, for the laird to lay hands upon her even if it was only to drag her from the terrace like a spoiled child. She hated Randall for his maddening calm.

"Ah! Drove the gig for my brother, did you?" said Randall.

"I did, sir."

Randall was ignoring her, had seen through her ruse; she had never been able to deceive him. She was suddenly in awe of the laird of Ottershaw, more in awe of him than she had been of any man. She recognised his power. Folk would remember Randall Bontine as they remembered his father and grandfather, back for many a century. Nobody would remember Anna Sinclair. No matter how outrageously she behaved only the plain, neglected scribble of her birth – and her death, when it came – would witness that she had ever existed. In a moment of terrible clarity Anna saw that it mattered not who had fathered Robbie. Robbie would not be permitted to aspire to Ottershaw. Robbie would be forever exiled from this world of candelabra and champagne, the birthright of the children of the woman from Piperhaugh.

Without calculation, Anna began to cry.

"Take the gig, Sinclair," said Randall. "Drive her home to Strachan at once."

"Will I come back for Mr Gilbert, sir?"

"No. I'll provide my brother with a carriage."

Sandy nodded; he approved of the laird's practicality.

"Come on, Anna," Sandy said. "Come away wi' me."

She leaned against the young man, not resentful of the fact that he had been put in charge of her, as if he was a sheriff's agent and she his prisoner. Tears bleared the lights of the mansion, made rainbows about the lanterns in the trees.

"Tell me, Randall," she said, huskily. "Tell me t' my face, will you marry this woman from Piperhaugh?"

"Yes, Anna. I expect I will."

"How – how soon?"

"In September."

Rage, bitterness, covetous longing drained from her. Debilitated by the lack of such real, red emotions she rested her ead on Sandy's shoulder.

"Goodbye, Randall," she whispered.

Randall Bontine did not answer her and she did not see the onging in his sad grey eyes as Sandy drew her away.

Unexpected, unpredicted, rain fell effortlessly out of thin night cloud. Wakened from sleep by the sound of droplets pattering gainst the window, James Moodie experienced a pang of ismay at the swift change in the weather. He lay on his back, rms stiff by his sides, a sleeping position he had adopted bout Christmas-time. Rain came again with increased force ike pebbles tossed against the glass.

"So soon," James Moodie whispered.

In another time he would have risen, would have swept side the curtain and peered across the moor to see what the veather-change might mean to wool crops and the state of the oads. But he had seen too much weather, too many changes, nd was patient now, patient as stone waiting for frost to break t down to dust and for wind to smoor it into the fabric of the arth.

"It's not like May," he murmured aloud. "I wonder if it's ainin' in the Fintry hills?"

If it rained for half a day in Balnesmoor his purpose would e served. Three hours of steady downpour in the high ground o the east, though, would bring water seeping to the burns nd the burns crowding to the river. The wheel in the lade at ennart would begin to turn faster, and brown water to boil n the pots below the brig. "I hear you," he said.

James's vision of an afterlife was fashioned from memory, vas a paradise without angels, the Balnesmoor of old, a cottage in the Bonnywell, his papa living still and his sisters in the chimney corner, his mama handing him a cog of hot broth with a smile, her hand touching his hair, loving and tender and eternal. He longed for it passionately. He would not flinch now from that soft embrace, man grown into child. When it was done, his daughter would return and bring her daughter home. The bairn would grow and thrive in the shelter he had built. He, washed clean of disaffection, might look down on them and be content that he had done better in the leaving of his life than in the living of it.

Rain lashed the glass, hard and unremitting. Three hours would see the water rise. He would be gone before the Kennart folk trudged out to their looms.

James Simpson Moodie smiled, threw aside the blanket and set his feet firmly upon the floor.

The first spots of rain that came out of the darkness over the shoulder of Drumglass hissed on the hot glass of the lanterns and scattered the very last of the lovers from terraces and the oaks.

The Ottershaw ball had burned down to its embers. Randall had had the long tables cleared, silver washed and locked away, had dismissed exhausted servants to their beds. The very last carriage rolled off. The coach that had taken Gibbie and Alicia to Strachan Castle returned, rain-soaked. As he made his tour of the premises, an inexplicable depression came over the laird. He felt like two men, separate and distinct, joined in uneasy alliance. On nights like this he yearned for barracks and bivouacs and the high-handed selfishness of men at war. He did not want to be a Scottish gentleman, the lord of Ottershaw's peaceful parklands. If he had still been a soldier he would have taken Anna to his bed without a qualm.

"Gilbert," he had said. "I want no punishment meted out to her."

"Come now, Randall, she's done a mischief and Alicia will not let the matter lie."

"Give her a wigging if you must, but that's all."

"I cannot understand why she came here," Gilbert had said.

"No," Randall had said. "But we are not, thank God, females, Gibbie, and we'll never understand the female heart."

"Did – did Mistress Seaton—"

"Suzanne's no innocent. She has many brothers and knows what men are like. She will not, I'm sure, hold my past against me."

Randall toured the ground-floor rooms. The house seemed exhausted by revelry. He was glad when the rain came sweeping over the hill for it seemed cleansing and refreshing. Dunn, his valet, was fast asleep in his cubby off the library. The boy still wore his gay uniform but he had been tippling wine and had been a little sick and snored uncomfortably on his back. Randall drew the blanket over the boy's shoulders, then went along the corridor to his bedchamber. There was no fire in the grate, no lamp lighted. Dunn had not even turned down the bedclothes. The room seemed bleak. All trace of soft May warmth had gone with the coming of the rain.

Seated on the side of the bed, with only a wax candle to give light, Randall unhooked and unbuttoned his clothes and discarded them carelessly. He was not in the least sleepy. He poured himself whisky from the decanter and carried a glass to the window. It was very dark now. All trace of stars and moon was wiped out by gusting rain. Scotch weather, unpredictable, full of contrasts and character. Sipping whisky, he thought of Anna. He had never stopped wanting her but never again would he yield to the weakness that craved her fire. The affair was over. To revive it would only bring heartache and disrepute. He was not 'trade' like James Moodie. He could not take a wife off the hillside and turn her into a lady, or risk maintaining such a notorious mistress. Thinking of Anna stirred his desire. He needed a wife. He must marry and marry soon. If not, he might yet make a fool of himself, summon Anna back to Ottershaw, lose all that he had gained, lose years of contentment with Suzanne.

Suddenly Randall put down the glass and went out of the room. He stole along the corridor, wearing nothing but his tight trousers and an open shirt. Damned if he would not take her; now, tonight. If Suzanne would not be taken, he would bring Anna back to Ottershaw, would breed a string of bastards, would become a blackguard and an outcast. To put it all to one act of impulsive love in the small hours of a damp spring night was a gesture that warmed Randall's blood.

He found his way into that part of the house once inhabited by Gibbie and Alicia and now given over to his female guest. Where Suzanne's maid slept, he did not know nor care. He groped for the handle, thrust open the door, stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

"Who is it? Who is there? Walter, is it you?"

"Randall," he said thickly. "It's Randall."

She sat up in bed, pale and ethereal, a silly muslin cap covering her golden locks, her nightgown clinging to her breasts.

"Where's your maid?"

"Randall, what do you—"

"You know what I want, Suzanne," he said. "Tell me to leave, if you will."

"No. Stay."

"The maid . . . ?"

"Next door. She will be fast asleep."

He untied the cord of his trousers, stripped himself in a trice. Suzanne watched without sign that she feared the heat and the lawlessness of his seduction. He had no doubt that she was virginal. He marvelled at the quality of her trust and at the fact that such a pretty, pampered girl might harbour an ardent desire.

Naked, he stepped to the bed, reached out and drew her against him. He could feel the delicate bones of her spine through the slippery muslin. The weight of her breasts pressed against his chest. He clasped her tighter, as if to break her, crush her. He lowered his mouth to her lips and inserted his tongue between her teeth in the manner he had learned in France. She gasped, flailed her hand until she found his hair and tugged him from her. He thought that she would split the silence with a scream but she did not. Instead, she tore off the silly cap and flung it from her. She let her hair fall unribboned about her shoulders. In the furtive flicker of firelight, she was beautiful and abandoned. The real fever of desire started in Randall and he yielded to it. Making a fist about the neck of her nightgown he broke the ribbons and exposed her breasts. He dropped his mouth hungrily to her nipple, while Suzanne

Seaton, the modest daughter of Piperhaugh, arched her back against the bolsters and cunningly surrendered to the man she loved.

PART TWO

SIX

The Doctrine of the Law

Whistling cheerfully, Keir Bolderon strode along Hanover Street. He reached the door of Mrs Melrose's house, rang the bell and waited, heart fluttering with excitement and apprehension. He had made sure by letter that Mrs Melrose would be in residence but he had not arranged a date or time for the appointment; he felt that it would be to the benefit of his cause if he caught her just a mite off guard. He gave the iron hook a manly tug a second time and heard, to his relief, the tap of a servant's shoes upon the steps within.

It was broad daylight still. The skyline of the city was cut against a stainless blue. There was nothing clandestine in Mr Bolderon's call upon Mrs Melrose. He had come with honourable intention, to put a proposal of marriage. He was fairly confident that he would not be refused, not out of hand. His confidence waned a little when the door was jerked open and Miss Scobie confronted him. Normally he had no fear of servants, even those as highly placed in the domestic hierarchy as housekeeper and companion. But Miss Scobie was not herself. She was all flustered and feathery and, for a moment or two, at a loss for words.

"I have come to call on your mistress," said Keir Bolderon. "I trust that it is not inconvenient."

"You – you – you're not expected," said Miss Scobie.

She was one of those odd spinsterish women who had passed directly from puberty into middle age; Keir Bolderon had no notion what her age might be. She blinked grey lashes over grey eyes, her cheeks red.

"Mistress Melrose is – is verra busy, sir," she stammered.

"Ah! But she *is* at home?"

"She's wi' her sister, Mr Bolderon."

Much, if not quite all, of Bolderon's confidence drained away. There was something materially wrong here. It was not his unexpected appearance on the stoup that had caused consternation. His arrival was but a drop in a bucket of larger concerns. Bolderon hesitated. It would do no harm, surely, to meet Olivia's sister. After all, he might soon be a member of the family and should endear himself to his relatives.

"Pop upstairs, Miss Scobie, an' inform Mrs Melrose that I'd be grateful for the favour of a word with her."

The housekeeper did not jump to do his bidding.

Bolderon said, "Is there illness in the house?"

"No. No, sir."

"I'll not keep Mrs Melrose from her guest for long."

"Come up, then, Mr Bolderon," the housekeeper said and, turning, led him up the narrow staircase and into the apartments. "I'll see what she says."

Hat in hand Keir Bolderon waited in the corridor at the top landing while Scobie buzzed into the drawing-room. He heard raised voices, female and shrill, indignation and dismay in the tone and wondered what event might have occurred to so disrupt the placid running of the household. He was more curious than amorous now and was relieved when Scobie thrust her head from the drawing-room door and beckoned him to enter.

Light from the west slanted over the roofs of the houses and speared through the windows. There was dust in the air. No fire in the grate and no candles were lighted yet. No pretty tea-things on the tables, only a stone bottle – gin – and a water jug and two pewter tankards, small in size but hardly dainty. It came home to Keir Bolderon that he had never seen Olivia Melrose in full daylight. He was surprised to note that she was not quite so youthful or so fresh as he had supposed her to be. The other woman in the drawing-room, clearly 'the sister', was not fresh at all. She was tall, bony, pinch-cheeked, with eyes as hard as acorns under plucked brows. Both women, standing, stared at him as if he had stepped naked into their company.

"We had no appointment that I recall, Mr Bolderon," Olivia Melrose began, without preliminary.

"That's true, madam," said Bolderon with a bow. He had somehow committed a dreadful gaffe but did not know how to extricate himself gracefully. "I – I see you're busy, Mrs Melrose. I shall not intrude."

"Wait." Olivia sighed deeply. Her bosom swelled with resignation. "May I introduce my sister? Mrs Janet McNaught."

"I'm delighted to meet—"

"I've spoken of Mr Bolderon, Janet, if you remember."

"The pit person?"

"Yes."

"I'm pleased t' make your acquaintance, Mr Bolderon."

There was to be no sitting down. The sisters were poised, not for flight since there was no evidence of outdoor apparel, but to return to whatever topic had engaged them prior to his intrusion, a subject of considerable weight, he reckoned, if it required raw gin to make it lighter.

"And I yours, Mistress McNaught." Keir Bolderon bowed once more.

In spite of his discomfiture he was beginning to make a modicum of sense from his observations. It seemed Mrs Melrose was not quite the thoroughbred he had imagined her to be. On the evidence of her sister there was more blue-stocking than blue-blood in her background. Mrs McNaught had a distinctive accent, a twang that she had not managed to soften. She was more direct too. He could not imagine himself engaged in 'literary badinage' with Janet. What was more, Mrs McNaught was clad from head to toe in black.

"Now, Mr Bolderon," said Olivia Melrose, "may I enquire as to the nature of your business?"

"It's – it's no business at all," said Keir Bolderon lamely. "Indeed, I see you are busy and I'll take my leave in the hope that perhaps we may meet again before your return to Perthshire."

"I shall not, I fear, be returning to Aberfeldy for some weeks. I have pressin' business here in Edinburgh."

"Business?" said Keir Bolderon. "Is it – if you will pardon me – perhaps some sort of business upon which I might offer my advice?"

Janet McNaught swung away with an almost, but not quite, inaudible snort. She was patently unimpressed by his charm. Olivia, however, gave another sigh and seated herself upon the couch. She folded her hands into her lap and shook her head. "We have suffered an unexpected bereavement."

"Oh, dear me!" Keir Bolderon muttered.

"We have, in fact, returned only this morning from my brother's interment."

"Your brother?" Keir Bolderon found the cushion of a little chair with his thighs and seated himself, all without taking his eyes from Olivia Melrose. "I did not even know you had a brother."

"It's many years since –" Olivia began, only to be interrupted by her sister.

"I question if this gentleman's interested in our domestic affairs, Olivia," said Mrs McNaught. "I canna see what a pit person would have t' do with matters of law."

"Law?" Keir Bolderon drew his chair closer. "Was your brother – rest his soul – a lawyer?"

"My brother was a man of considerable property."

"Does he leave family?" Bolderon asked. "I mean, a wife?"

"Oh, aye, he has a wife," put in Mrs McNaught.

In spite of her reluctance to involve a stranger in the discussion Janet McNaught could not resist the opportunity to vent her spleen upon the departed. Hatred, not grief, was the emotion that made her throat tighten and her voice shrill.

The romantic purpose of his visit put aside, Keir Bolderon inched his chair forward still further. He placed a consoling hand upon Olivia's wrist. She did not draw away.

"The wife, however, cannot be found," said Olivia.

"She abandoned him," put in Janet. "Ran off."

"I do not understand, quite."

"Took her child, a babe, and departed his house," said Olivia.

"Who can blame her for that?" said Janet.

Keir Bolderon chose his words with care. "So what happens to the inheritance?"

He had no reason to suppose that the brother had left property or wealth yet he could see no other valid reason for the sisters' upset. His immediate grasp of the situation seemed to bring him closer to Olivia Melrose. Even the acerbic Janet darted him a glance of admiration.

"The inheritance is to be held in trust," said Olivia.

"Is there – I mean, is the portion considerable?"

"My brother was a mill owner," said Olivia.

"Does the mill function?"

"Coins money like the Royal Mint," said Janet. "Jamie was a Midas when it came to makin' money." She poured gin from the stone bottle into a tankard and swilled it over her throat in a most unladylike manner. "He workit himself – an' us – near t' death."

Keir Bolderon relaxed. These women were not so different from himself. Airs and graces, the evidence of money, had blinded him to their virtues. Now he saw them for what they were: sisters of a weaver man who had somehow hit the mark. Questions formed in Keir's mind. He sorted them into logical order.

"Where, if I may ask, is the mill?"

"Kennart, in the Lennox," Olivia answered.

"And your brother's name?"

"Moodie, James Moodie."

The name – that name – meant nothing to Keir Bolderon. He put another cautious question – and another. Soon the sisters were tumbling over themselves to give him information. This rapport would, he was certain, stand him in fine stead when it came time to press his suit with the handsome Olivia.

It seemed that the women had risen from a humble cottage in the Lennox where they had been trapped by the ferocious ambition and tyrannical energy of their brother. They had done well enough in the marriage stakes. Once quit of Balnesmoor they had severed connection with their brother and had had no communication for several years. To Keir it did not seem callous, this shucking off of the burden of kinship. He had done much the same sort of thing, though for different reasons. He also learned that Janet McNaught was wed to a sea captain who was gone on trading voyages for many, many months at a time. She lived – in some style apparently – in Dundee. She had two grown sons, also sailors, and a daughter-in-law who kept her company in the long, lonely months of separation. She was of different stamp to Olivia whose name was not really Olivia but Lizzie. The conversation was enlightening to Keir Bolderon. It brought him closer to Olivia Melrose and her money. He might have stayed all night long, playing the confidant, wheedling stories from the women.

He was brought up short in his pursuit of information, however, by one fact, a fact so startling that he could not grasp it at first.

It emerged during a rambling sequence of questions and [illegible]

"He was given a Christian burial, of course," said Olivia, "but it would seem that – perhaps – Jamie took his own life."

"Drowned himself deliberately, do you mean?"

"In the river by the mill. His horse was found loose and wandering by one of the mill-hands. Jamie's corpse was dragged from the mill lade about an hour later."

"On what evidence was—" Keir began.

"I ha'e my doubts if Jamie would take his own life," Janet interrupted. "He was no horseman. He'll have fell off while crossin' the bridge."

"But he made plans, did he not?" said Olivia. "Intricate and clever plans in collusion with that lawyer."

"He was sick."

"Distracted by the runaway wife."

"The steward let it slip, remember," said Janet to Olivia. "He was wi'out the faculty o' reason."

"Was it a lunatic who shaped that will?" asked Olivia of Janet.

"Leavin' it all tied an' packaged for the young wife," said Janet. "Aye, perhaps you're right, Lizzie."

"Do not, I beg you, call me by that name."

"You'll always be Lizzie to me, dearest."

Keir Bolderon nudged them back from sisterly squabble.

"Am I to understand that the wife cannot be found?" he asked.

"She's been gone near three years. Jamie fetched in word o' her by offerin' cash for information. But that dried up," said Janet McNaught. "It's clear he was infatuated wi' this slattern off the hill."

"Off the hill?"

"She was a foundlin'," said Janet. "Reared by a drover's whore. It was a fair scandal when we were young. Am I not right, Liz – Olivia?"

"Yes. Now the brat's worth fifty or sixty thousand pounds."

"I beg your pardon?" said Keir Bolderon.

"Sixty thousand pounds. Even more," said Janet. "But the brat doesn't know it."

"The lawyer may find her," said Olivia.

"Is the lawyer making efforts in that direction?" said Keir Bolderon.

"Strenuous efforts," said Olivia.

"Intendit t' keep us from our rightful portion," said Janet.

"I see," said Keir Bolderon. "You cannot inherit under the aw while the wife is presumed to be alive?"

"Or until we challenge the will in a law court."

"Perhaps the wife is dead. Or lost. Gone off into England. Shipped to America," Keir Bolderon suggested.

He was thinking of what it would mean to him to have access to sixty thousand pounds. What fine leases it would purchase. He did not think of the money in the abstract as the Moodie sisters seemed to do but in specific terms, in terms of power. He could feel his palms grow moist at the prospect. God knows, an inheritance of even half that sum would make Olivia Melrose doubly desirable.

"If she is just hidin'," said Janet, "she'll come out when she hears Jamie's dead an' buried."

"How will she learn of it?"

"She may read this, for instance."

Olivia, turning, brought a copy of the *Glasgow Herald* from the table behind the couch. Janet stepped from the window and stood by Keir Bolderon as he took the newspaper, folded into a rectangle to display a notice printed within an engraved box. It was a request for information on the whereabouts of a woman of twenty-four years, fair of complexion, who might pass by the name of Elspeth Patterson or Cochran and have in her care a child of three years, by name Mary Jean.

Keir Bolderon lifted his gaze from the page and stared into the dust motes. He remained thus for three or four seconds then read on.

Parties with knowledge of the woman were invited to communicate with A. B. S. Hildebrand, Esquire, of the Freemasons' Loan, Dumbarton.

No mention was made of a reward.

The Moodie sisters chittered, chattered and speculated on whether the advertisement would produce a response when all Jamie's efforts with handbills and promises of money had failed so to do. Keir Bolderon heard hardly a word. He held the folded newspaper in his fist and read the text again.

Elspeth Patterson.

A blonde mother and a blonde child.

Mary Jean.

He gave a little shiver as if an insect had brushed the nape of his neck and made the hairs rise.

"Mr Bolderon?" said Olivia Melrose.

"Uh? Yes, Mrs Melrose?"

"We have been discourteous in not offerin' you refreshment."

"No," said Keir Bolderon, rising. "I've intruded enough upon your deliberations. I'm delighted to have made your acquaintance, Mistress McNaught. I trust that we might meet again in less solemn circumstances."

He mouthed the phrases automatically, the newspaper clutched in his right hand like a baton.

Olivia Melrose got to her feet, placed a hand on his sleeve.

"Why did you call this evening, Mr Bolderon? Was it on a matter of importance?"

"No. Oh, no," said Keir. "nothin' that cannot wait."

"Will you call upon me again?"

"If you can endure my company."

Olivia escorted him to the door. "Once this matter is settled, we'll sup together."

"I'll look forward to it."

"Mr Bolderon?"

"Yes, Mrs Melrose?"

"Our newspaper."

"Ah! How silly of me."

Reluctantly he returned the copy of the *Glasgow Herald* which had somehow adhered to his fingers; then he went on his way out into the streets of Edinburgh, his head full of questions, not unmingled with doubts.

Davy did not last long as a coal-hewer. No matter how desperately the boy desired to become a man, to earn a man's age, health denied him an opportunity. It was Elspeth's pinion – though she kept it to herself – that Davy Bennet ould never go below ground again. He collapsed at the face the hidden seam in the wee small hours of a Saturday shift. le had made little progress into the seam, a few scrapings, no ore, though the stock of cut coal that Jock had piled against e rock had been shifted through the trap, hauled to the tally askets and had brought the family one good pay-day. There as less cut coal than Davy had estimated, however, and he as obliged to take hammer and wedges to the great black urtain of coal much sooner than he had anticipated. The task as, quite simply, too strenuous for him. He stuck to it for leven days then swooned clean away and was brought out, mp and wheezing, by Elspeth while Mouse stayed at the unnel's end to seal the secret seam once more.

The mercy of it was that it was summer. The days were arm, the nights balmy. The river was blue as a pigeon's wing hich, in the long easy evenings, became feathered with gold. olliers revelled in the weather. They took their wives for alks by the green shore after their shift was done. Men drank n the sward outside the Grapes, lay on green grass and smoked heir pipes, and their voices seemed less harsh and tempers ess explosive now that the winter was well and truly over.

For Davy Bennet it was a bed by the wall, out of the breeze hat drifted up river and carried grit from the shafts across the ottages. He wore a clean shirt, open at the throat, and was ashed clean of the ingrained grime of his occupation. The ed was lifted on three bricks to hold his head up and make reathing more comfortable. He lay there for a week, obedient nd chastened. He sipped broth that Elspeth made for him, rank cups of sweet fresh milk that Mouse walked to the farm o fetch. He even let Sarah put cool compresses on his head hen little waves of fever – fever without sweat – dithered over is body. Lying there, Davy Bennet looked like an angel, at east when his lips were closed and his hoarse seeping struggle or breath temporarily eased.

Thomas Rance came down to see the lad. He frowned, onsoled Davy without much conviction and advised Elspeth o purchase the services of a doctor. This she did. She sent Mouse to the post in Placket with a letter to a physician that

Mr Rance recommended, a certain Mr Kidson who lived in Alloa and had made a special study of diseases of the lungs.

Mr Kidson arrived in a pony-cart about dinner-time on Thursday. He was a small dapper gentleman of forty, fastidious in dress and manner, with an accent and intonation that made him sound, Elspeth thought, like a willow-warbler. Certainly there was a liquid note in his voice when he requested payment of a fee in advance and explained, at great length, that while he was activated by a certain degree of philanthropy and would manifest a benevolent spirit in truly needy cases he did not regard himself as a totally charitable institution and must therefore request the standard rate for a four-hour journey – three guineas, please.

Elspeth paid him out of sight of Davy, then led him round to the front of the cottage where the boy lay, face to the sky, eyes closed.

Kidson was nothing if not thorough. He asked questions regarding appetite, sweating and evacuations. He took his answers from Elspeth who, with Mouse and Sarah by her side, stood back a piece from the open-air ward. He bent Davy this way and that, pressed a copper listening-trumpet against his chest, ribs and spine, asked questions about vomiting, then collected spit on a piece of cotton and studied it under a glass for a moment or two.

"Phthisis," he said, at length.

The word meant nothing to Elspeth. She thought of Michael Blaven, how he had died of a condition of the lungs, how she had not known of it until he was within days of death. She thought too, as she watched the doctor work, of Janet Blaven's herbal potions and wondered what the woman would do for Davy if he had been under her care.

Round-eyed, sullen and scared, Davy stared at the doctor who, for all the consideration he gave to his patient, might have been treating a dumb animal.

"Incurable," Kidson declared.

Sarah crept close enough to touch Elspeth's skirt with her fingers but Mouse gave no sign of having understood the import of the doctor's diagnosis. Mouse was in awe of him, struck stupid by his presence. Elspeth had no fear of men like idson. She had met dozens like him; not physicians, of course, it professional gentlemen puffed with their own importance. ne stepped forward and made a beckoning gesture which ok Kidson by surprise.

“If you will step in here, sir.” Elspeth gestured to the door the cottage.

“For what reason, young woman?”

“For reason of discretion, sir.”

Tutting quietly, Kidson followed Elspeth across the reshold into the gloom of the kitchen.

Elspeth said, “I've paid you three guineas, Mr Kidson, for hich you've given me a name I do not understand.”

“Are you a relative? You're not his sister, that I can see.”

Elspeth did not answer. Instead she said, “You've also given n opinion, sir, which you make sound infallible.”

“What do you require of me, young woman?”

“Information.”

Kidson cocked his head. “The boy has a chronic inflam-ation of the upper and lower bronchial system. Is that omprehensible to you?”

“Aye,” said Elspeth. “How far gone is he?”

Kidson stared at Elspeth out of clever little eyes. “He is asically weak, by constitution. I cannot ‘cure’ him.”

“But will he die?” Elspeth lowered her voice to a whisper r Mouse was eavesdropping just outside the door.

“I see,” said Kidson. “You do not expect me to provide im with a wonderful elixir which will have him back at the oal seam before next pay-day?”

“He's a boy, Mr Kidson, not a breadwinner.”

“Where's his father?”

“His father was recently killed.”

Kidson nodded again. “The boy grieves; that's not beneficial o his condition.”

“He hasn't the strength to grieve,” said Elspeth. “What ust I do t' keep him alive and put him on the road to ecovery?”

“He must never be sent to work below ground,” said Kidson. Never again. Nor must he be given any sort of labour which ill tax him. In other words, he'll be a burden to you for vermore.”

"But will he survive?"

"Oh, he's constitutionally capable of survival, I daresay. He was probably sent below at too early an age. The pink tissues within the body collect hostile susbstances much more readily in a child than in an adult. His blood's thick with charcoal particles. It must be systematically cleansed."

"How is that done?"

"I'll dispense a remedy," said Kidson. "Also he must be given fresh milk daily, laced with a little warm linseed. When he has been purged of some of the saturation, I will bleed him."

"What can he eat?"

"Plain food. Never to excess. Lemons will be beneficial. Some ale. No spirits. No scrag meat, either. Its digestion causes acids."

Elspeth listened carefully. Much of what Kidson told her she might have deduced for herself: the sound common sense of nursing. But the physician, if he had given her nothing else, had imparted hope. If Davy's illness could not be cured, it might at least be arrested. He might be kept alive. She knew why Kidson had termed the illness 'incurable'; the conditions of healing were such that a majority of pit families would have regarded them as impossible to fulfil, would have tacitly accepted the expert's opinion and let the lad slide away from them. But that was not Elspeth's way.

She thanked Kidson, went out with him and across the plank bridge to his cart. He had two large wooden cases there. From one he extracted a jar of white powder, half-pint size, which he gave to Elspeth with instructions as to mixing and dosage.

He climbed into the cart and took the reins in his hands, then paused and looked down at her.

"You've not told me yet who you are."

"I was the servant here," said Elspeth.

"The father's woman?"

"Yes."

"You're no pit wife, however?"

"I've been on the Abbeyfield for years," said Elspeth.

The doctor's eyes were too searching, too clever by half. She felt a chill of apprehension and was thankful that Mary Jean as down at the minder's school and not by her side. Could be possible, she wondered, that James was still in active arch for her, that a person like Doctor Kidson of Alloa might ive heard of the runaway wife of Balnesmoor?

The events of the past months, and confinement on the obeyfield, had dulled Elspeth's fears to a dream-like indifrence to her past and the threat that the past held; yet a man ce Kidson, a man who might have 'connections' across the ountry, served to remind her that she was not, and never ould be, wholly safe from discovery.

Kidson gave her a small salute.

"Write to me – you do write, I suppose? – in four weeks and port on the boy's progress. If necessary I'll come back."

"To bleed him, sir?"

"He should be ready for it by then," said Kidson, and cked the reins.

Elspeth watched the pony-cart bounce across the field and id the path to the gate.

Unless Davy's condition worsened she would not send for octor Kidson again. Apart from the fact that she did not elieve in indiscriminate bleeding, she doubted if, in a month's me, she would be able to muster three guineas, for, without hewer to cut for them, Mouse and she would be forced to go 1 day wage and the family to live on the bone.

was an hour before nightfall. Thomas Rance was in the arden of his lodge, giving attention to his celery plants. He as not possessed of green fingers, and the plots of turned round were sown randomly. He had been moved to experiient with the lightest of the vegetables only because he was ond of it stewed, braised or put in soup. But the experiment as proving unsuccessful. Somehow he had let the plants run seed. He had dug the trenches for transplanting, one foot depth and about the same across; yet the blessed vegetables ardly seemed worth the labour, being thin as writing-quills nd limp as tallow tapers.

He had come to a stop in his work, was bent forward to cowl at the things, as if he might intimidate them into growing ealthy and strong, when a soft voice called his name. Looking p, he saw that Elspeth Patterson had come to the gate without his being aware of her approach. He wiped loam from his hands on the back of his breeks, unfurled his shirt sleeves over his scarred forearms and went to the gate to greet her.

He did not invite her to enter the garden. He was wary of the reputation that some oversmen had for misusing their position to bring young women to their beds. He would have none of that, not in thought and not in deed.

Brusquely he said, "What do you want here at this hour?"

"I've had the Alloa doctor to Davy," said Elspeth.

Thomas Rance grunted, waited.

Elspeth went on, "He'll not work below ground again."

"Is this sickness mortal, then?"

"Only if he works in black air."

"What do you want of me, lass?"

"A promise on the cottage."

"What sort of promise?" said Thomas Rance warily.

He folded his arms and confronted her across the wicket gate. The night air was sweet with the perfumes of flowering summer and the young woman had a lover's shyness which brought into the man's mind the breathless delights of his courtship and the first long season of his marriage.

"If I pay rent for a six month, will you let us stay there?" said Elspeth.

"Do you have such a sum put aside?"

"Aye. Mr Bennet had saved a few pounds."

"What if Mr Bolderon decides he needs to recruit a new hewer; an' the hewer has a family in need of a dwellin' place?" said Thomas Rance.

"Is there no other house vacant?"

"No, there's not."

"Please, Mr Rance, I beg you to give us a quarter. Two months, at least."

She was different from the run of collier women. They would have demanded it, claimed it as their right.

"I'll need t' make sure all the coal is gotten from Jock Bennet's room," said Thomas Rance. "That'll mean employing a hewer. I cannot give over a good house to a family without a man in it."

"There are houses occupied by widows," said Elspeth.

"Hardly more than sheds. Besides, would you have me hrow a widow woman out just to accommodate you?"

"You know I would not," said Elspeth.

"If you pay rent in advance, what will you live on?"

"Our earnings from wage work."

"Och, so you want me to find you wage work too?"

"Until Davy's better."

"Do not con me, lass. I've seen what the black spit does to ll-grown men. Your Davy'll not recover."

"The girls an' I can bring in enough—"

"As harness wives?"

"If that's all there is, aye."

"The harness is not for you, Mrs Patterson," said Thomas ance.

"Why not, may I ask?"

"You haven't the bones for it."

"I'm no weaklin'," Elspeth protested.

"The best I could do for the girl-child would be a ventilator."

"Give me a harness, an' Mouse a rope; that's all I ask."

"You'd be better findin' a man," said Thomas Rance.

"I want no man. I need no man."

"Perhaps not," said Thomas Rance. "I can find you the vork. For a wee while I can permit you the cottage. But I can lo no more, Mrs Patterson. If you fall sick or if I decide I nust have coal taken from the base level then I'll have to put ou out."

"I couldn't find a hewer here, could I?"

"Even at high money it's not a job many men will jump t," Thomas Rance answered. "Besides, coal men are hard to ind in these parts."

"If," said Elspeth, "it did become necessary . . . ?"

The oversman shrugged. "Leith is the best place. There are ometimes men there who have pit work in their past."

"I think," said Elspeth, "it'd be a bold man who would take n the Bennets. Saddle himself with a cripple an' a bairn."

"Aye, but if you'll excuse my forwardness, there's many a nan would take you on, lass," said Thomas Rance.

She did not, he noticed, simper and protest. She had a sound ense of her own worth and little enough vanity to pollute it.

The oversman said, "What's it to be?"

"I'll take the harness an' Mouse will tug a rope."

"Very well. I'll see to it you're both booked for the shift tomorrow."

"An' the house?"

"You may have it until it's needed." Thomas Rance sighed. "I'll not throw you out. We'll find you somethin', never fear."

"Thank you, Mr Rance."

"Aye, well! I doubt if you'll be thankin' me come dusk tomorrow," the oversman said.

But all he got for his warning was a pleasant smile and a little gesture that might have been a curtsy.

It would not have been seemly for Keir Bolderon to wander about the dwelling fields in search of Elspeth Patterson. Colliers were jealous of their privacy and, though the houses and cots might belong to the pit-owner, they regarded their lives as their own and resented intervention or supervision.

It seemed highly improbable that the wife of a wealthy mill-owner from the Lennox would wind up slaving in a Fifeshire coal pit, that chance would draw a line between her husband and her employer. Opportunity and random chance, though, were birds of a feather. Bolderon had stumbled over even more outrageous examples of coincidence in the course of his existence. But his approach must be very discreet.

"Thomas, just the man I'm looking for," Keir Bolderon said.

He had put his horse to the stable to be given a good brushing and had come down, as if on a normal tour of inspection, to the counting-house where Thomas Rance was supervising the uncoiling of new hemp rope from the works at Milnathort.

"Ah, Mr Bolderon. See this," said the oversman. "It's the new improvement for a winding-cable. Hemp with wire twist."

Keir Bolderon was still an engineer and, for a moment or two, the great undulating hanks of rope caught and held his attention.

It had been delivered not on the back of a cart, like a worm-cast, but in a special straw bale, unpacked as if it was a piece of treasure from an Etruscan tomb. The rope was of novel design and manufacture. He examined it, hands on knees and head bent, foot by foot, diligently searching for imperfections that might cause it to wear out in a month instead of four. It certainly looked odd, with dark metal embedded in the flock-grey hairs of treated hemp.

"What about rust?" he asked.

"Denniston has used one at Deep Water," Thomas Rance said. "He tells me it discolours but does not decay. There's a chemical washed into the fibres t' prevent it."

"What chemical?"

"That's a secret o' the rope-makers," said Thomas Rance.

"When will you install it?" Keir Bolderon asked.

"On Sunday," said Rance.

Keir Bolderon nodded. "Good. It certainly has a different and intriguin' appearance. Let me know if it's tractable."

The oversman signalled to two young boys who trotted from the door of the counting-house and began to roll the rope into two 'spectacles', from which shape it would be put on to a winding-drum and cranked into place over the main shaft. Bolderon watched the boys at work. When he and Thomas Rance had gone, of course, their enthusiasm for the task would wane considerably and they would become less alert and energetic. He smiled. He remembered his days as a youth, how much effort he had put into doing as little as possible when out of the employer's eye.

Casually, he said, "Is that not the Bennet lad?"

Thomas Rance glanced at the boy on the rope's end. "No, Mr Bolderon."

"Bennet's below ground, I suppose."

"No, Bennet's sick. Very sick. Black spit, by the sound of it."

"Bless me," said Keir Bolderon, still casually. "That family have had a time of misfortune, have they not?"

"She asked for time in the house."

"Who did?"

"The woman who looked after them."

"The servant woman?"

"Aye, Mr Bolderon. You saw her at the kirkyard, if I recall."

"Pretty lass," said Keir Bolderon, watching the boys furl the rope. "Did you find work for her?"

"Pullin'," said Thomas Rance.

In spite of himself Keir Bolderon whipped round and stared at his oversman. "Pulling? On the ventilators?"

"Harness."

"Good God!"

"Is somethin' wrong, Mr Bolderon?"

"What? No, no. It just seems – how can I put it – dismal work for such a handsome girl."

"It's all there is. The family needs the wage."

"What about the coal, the room?"

"I've been down. There's eight or nine weeks left in the take. We can bring it out with Ogilvie after he's burnt through his room."

"Yes, that sounds sensible."

"Or we might employ another hewer," Thomas Rance suggested.

Bolderon appeared to give the matter some thought.

He asked. "Would it be worth it?"

"I doubt it, sir."

"I'll tell you what, Thomas. I'll go down myself. Tomorrow or the next day."

"I'll accompany you, sir."

"No, Thomas," Keir Bolderon said. "That will not be necessary."

Olivia Melrose, *née* Lizzie Moodie, had been more upset by the trip back to Balnesmoor than she dared admit to her sister. She had suffered pangs of regret at her neglect of her brother, at the realisation that Jamie had been alone and friendless during the last, trying months of his life. She was not altogether surprised that he had drowned himself. There had always been a dark, brooding streak in him which the events of the past years had obviously brought to the fore. Janet Mary, of course, would have none of such sentimentality. During the final stages of the carriage ride Janet had done nothing but complain. Bitterness had come trickling back as the coach rolled through Buchlyvie, Harlwood, Balfron and along the last miles to Balnesmoor.

The Moodie girls had known this part of the country intimately. Jamie had driven them across it in search of cloth orders, had forced them out with demonic zeal day after day, week in and week out in all shades of weather. Olivia recalled the pain of chapped hands and chilblains, biting winds off the moor cold enough to turn your blood to ice, days of incessant rain when Jamie was only concerned that the cloth parcels be kept dry and spared not a thought for the health of his sisters. She also remembered – cruellest of all recollections – how her mother had turned more and more to Jamie after Daddy's death, had drawn away from her girls as if she found in her son a quality of salvation that daughters could never provide. Girlhood was lost in a black fog of drudgery. It was as if the weaving-loom had become an instrument of penance upon which her brother punished himself for some secret crime. It was, Olivia assumed, that obsession that had earned him the mill, the mansion, wealth untold, that had led him into marriage with Elspeth Patterson. But what sort of woman, even a rough hill tyke, could long endure her brother's dry passion and live with the demon that possessed his heart?

She understood why Janet was so implacably bitter; would not attend the kirkyard to lay a flower on the grave; would not even stay in Jamie's house, though rooms had been prepared for them by Tolland the steward. They had lodged in the inn at Harlwood and had not attended the kirk service or gone to stand by the wall while Jamie was put into the ground. By all accounts there was a multitude of men there, including the aird and his brother, but Janet sneered at that news too and delivered her own pointed epitaph: *"Good riddance."*

Janet had come back to Balnesmoor for one purpose, and it was not to mourn her deceased brother or to see him put to his eternal rest. She had come to find out how much he had eft her in plain, material terms.

The lawyer was from Dumbarton, a stork-like man named Angus Hildebrand. He had entertained them, if that was the word, in the drawing-room of Moss House only hours after the funeral and, wasting no time, read out Jamie's will and testament. Olivia was still upset and did not at first take in the significance of the legal rigmarole.

Janet, though, had quickly twigged its meaning.

In outrage, she had cried, *"The devil left us nothin'."*

The lawyer had clearly anticipated some such reaction. He had prepared copies of the documents for them to take away but had assured them, with a fishy little smile, that James Simpson Moodie's fortune, and a whale of a fortune it was, could not be wrested from trust and that he, like a sentry, would stand guard over it until the legitimate heirs were traced, however long that took.

The more she learned of Jamie's history the less Olivia understood it. She found it difficult to imagine that Gaddy Patterson's brat had grown into a beautiful woman, not at all bluff and uncultured like her mother; nor could she understand why Jamie had not cut her off without a penny to punish her for deserting him.

"Blood's thicker than water, Lizzie," Janet had said, as they drove back to the inn at Harlwood. "Jamie set it up for the benefit o' the child an' not the wife."

"I agree, dear. But I think he might have left us something."

"Something. It should *all* fall to us, should it not? We're his sisters; sisters that slaved for him for years an' years. Have ye forgotten?"

"Oh, no, I've not forgotten. He does, however, have a wife."

"What sort o' wife would drive him mad wi' her faithless behaviour an' then abandon him to die alone?"

"Janet, do you believe Jamie really did—"

"Drown himself? I neither know nor care. On balance, though, I believe he did."

"I don't care to think of it," Olivia had said.

"Could we challenge his sanity?" Janet had said.

"I'm not sure I would want to."

"By rights, Lizzie, all his property belongs to us."

"Mr Hildebrand seemed very confident that he would eventually trace the missing wife."

"It must be stopped."

"I do not see how."

"By law, of course," Janet Mary had said.

"I really don't know that much about the law."

"We must employ lawyers, experts, to challenge the will."

"Lawyers can be dreadfully expensive, dear."

"You can afford it, can y'not?"

"It would depend on the cost. I'm not poor, Janet, but my coffers are not bottomless."

"I want my full share, Lizzie. We deserve it."

"I suppose we do."

"Will you stand wi' me, then?"

"Yes. Yes, of course I will."

"Stand up an' fight Jamie's iniquity through the courts?"

"Janet, I—"

"Justice is on our side, Lizzie."

"Don't call me by that name," Olivia had said.

"Will you fight?"

"Yes."

Whatever disdainful opinion hewers held of the upper levels of the Abbeyfield and of the folk who laboured there, Elspeth soon realised that the malls that undulated away from the shaft bottom were the true roads to hell. There was more air to breathe than in the depths, more space too; but the picture she had formed by listening to man-talk was badly distorted.

Before a single shift was over, Elspeth knew that she would not long survive as a harness wife. Mr Rance was right: brute labour would prove too severe for her. Grit and determination would not harden her to its strains. She would rapidly buckle and eventually break. The security of fixed wages must be set against the surety that 'strapping' for long would cripple her and bring her to an early grave.

A woman named Turner showed her the ropes. In the woman's eyes glinted a fearful malevolence as if she derived satisfaction from the prospect that such a pretty-mannered lass would soon become as coarse and ugly as herself. Instruction was by demonstration, a dumb-show accompanied by smirks and winks. Elspeth was shown how to fit the harness, how to hook it to the wagon's chain, how the upper body must be thrust forward, the thighs braced to mobilise the 'hutchie', how the arms were used to balance it on wooden rails. The harness was of old, hard leather and brass-studded straps. Uncoupled, the hook hung down between the legs like a monkey's tail. But the thing that Elspeth hated even more than the bindings was the wagon itself. The hutchie was always with her, cramming the tunnel from wall to wall, from floor to ceiling, animate and looming and inescapable.

To a deep-seam man the upper tunnels might appear spacious but they were too low and narrow to take a pony, let alone a horse. No money had been spent on making them larger. In consequence, animals could not be used below the Abbeyfield. What need was there of beasts when human resources came cheap and every sort of economy was necessary to turn quantities of small coal into owners' profits? Old, gnarled men and young boys did most of the digging. They crouched in long rooms at the tunnel ends, chapping down the brittle chows. Shovels scraped it into heaps and scooped it into the hutchies which were dragged down to the blind and, two at a time, recoupled. Every hutch was packed with seven hundredweights of small coal and, even without a load, the vehicles weighed a hundredweight or more. Their wooden wheels sank on sagging wooden rails and the quiver of the rails turned the floor to black slush in those places where the slope ran downhill from dry top.

In this ant-hill of industry there was no room for friendships. The loneliness of the base tunnels had become isolation. Elspeth missed Mouse, Davy, even the sour-faced Ogilvies. Here no one had identity; the work was too monotonous, too racking hard. She did not even have the consolation of counting tally sticks to give a false lift of anticipation of a grand old pay-day, for the hutches were tipped on to a great communal ree that never seemed to grow smaller no matter how the bucket ducked and ate away at it.

It took no time at all for Elspeth to become indistinguishable from all the other strappers, except that she still wore flannel and not just a kilt of hempen sacking which chafed less and absorbed less water. Women went bare to the waist, breasts hanging, as they craned against the weight of coal, for the rub of any sort of fabric under the straps peeled away the skin in a matter of hours. By noon on the first day Elspeth too had shed her dress. Her shoulders and back were raw, scalded by trickles of sweat. By one o'clock or half past she hardly noticed such superficial discomforts for her muscles were jerked and her bones ached with a deep and unremitting pain that every jab of the wheels on the rails drilled deeper still. Mouth agape, eyes popping, hair straggled over her face, she struggled up and down the long mall from the main road. In flat sections, where nobody could see, she wept as she stabbed forward. Helpers, young boys, were stationed in niches on the slopes to give shoulder to the hutchies or to 'rod' them back, reining each one as if it was a thrawn bull that might charge off of its own accord and trample the strapper into the ground. Elspeth longed for her little sled, obstinate but lively. She longed for Mousie's sharp complaints in the confinement of the narrow tunnel, for the sound of Ogilvie's pick and Davy's cough, the wick of her own wan candle flickering in the dark. But all that was gone. She had become one of the herd. Below her nose was only black slush and the sight of her breasts smeared with grime, swaying against the bite of the old leather girth. When, at shift's end, she came out into the warm summer sun, part of her stayed below, attached to the hutchie; part of her was dead. That evening she ate little and fell down into her bed, unwashed.

Three days down and Elspeth knew it was hopeless. She tried to think of Gaddy, what Gaddy would say to encourage her, to bring her mother's cheerful voice to mind. But Gaddy could not be summoned into the dark of the pit. Gaddy belonged in open air, to wind, rain and sunshine, to the moor and the glen. She was silent in the vaulted tunnels where wagons rumbled and women toiled like beasts.

"You," said a voice. "I say, you."

Head down, bands of pain extended across her shoulders into the roots of her spine, bare feet slipping in the mush, the hutchie pressing insistently, Elspeth heard the voice only dimly. She did not at once lift her gaze from the scribble of light on the floor.

"Patterson, is it you?"

She closed her mouth and swallowed. She brushed rats'-tails of hair from her eyes, looked up.

He had a lamp in his hand, brown leather boots upon his feet and tweeds, even though it was summer. Tweed breeks were tucked into ribbed wool stockings of the sort that came from James's looms. She did not recognise him in the gloom, with the flutter of the lamplight between her and his face.

If he had called her Elspeth she would have dropped in fear where she stood. But it was 'Patterson', her collier name. She straightened, squinted and, even before she recognised him, modestly covered her breasts with her arms.

He did not give his name. He had no need. He was Mr

Bolderon and everybody knew him by sight. Lowering the lantern, he came forward. Elspeth saw on his face a strange look of bewilderment.

"*Are* you Elspeth Patterson?"

"Aye; sir."

"Why are you strappin'?"

"For my bread, sir."

Her tongue, like her brain, felt thick. She had hauled seven loads in the shift and, from that calculation, reckoned it was about two o'clock in the afternoon. Far down the mall behind her she heard the shrill moist shriek of a trailing hutchie as a helper applied the rod on the downhill slope. It would be here in two or three minutes, the woman plodding into the harness, snarling at her, perhaps, to push on, push on.

"I – I must make ground, Mr Bolderon."

"No. Wait."

She was almost weeping. He looked so unlike a collier, so unlike anything or anyone that she might encounter below ground. She associated him with James, with Balnesmoor, Moss House, and the commercial gentlemen that, when James required it, she had entertained to tea in the drawing-room. She was swept by shame.

Weeping, she cried, "I must make ground. I must."

She slipped, struggling, lost her footing and was held in a half-kneeling position by tension on the straps. He came to her at once, putting down the lantern. He did not touch her, did not endeavour to fondle her. He knelt by her side and, very gently, lifted the rats'-tails of hair from off her face with his fingertips.

"Are you sore?"

"Aye, sir."

"This is not work for you," Mr Bolderon said.

"Work is work. I must—"

"You need to be bred into strappin'," he said.

He leaned a little, staring into her face. She wiped away tears with her knuckle, sat back to slacken the straps and rose, staggering.

"Hear the hutchie?" she said. "I canna delay, Mr Bolderon. I'm not finished."

He shook his head. He squatted on his heels. He was clean-shaven, his hair with a curl to it, but had collected a dab of coal dirt on one cheek and his hands were stained with slush. Dirt did not seem to bother him and he did not shy away from helping her.

"May I help?"

Elspeth did not answer. Taking it as sanction, Keir Bolderon cautiously placed an arm about her and supported her while she found position.

"Where's the girl, the wee girl?"

"Mouse – Allison – she's on a rope in the north section."

"No, I mean your child."

"Sarah looks after her."

"What's her name; your child?"

She was surprised but not alarmed. She supposed that it was part of his success as a pit manager to feign an interest in his work force. She had heard of such things, read indictments of such intimacy in journals.

She answered, "Mary Jean."

Keir Bolderon sighed and, to Elspeth's amazement, chuckled as if, somehow, she had given him good news.

It seemed incredible to Keir Bolderon that a woman in his employ might be worth sufficient sum to buy the Abbeyfield, ock, stock and barrel, from under Fotheringham's nose. Fotheringham would sneer at the source of the capital, deride t as 'trade money', but money was money, new or old, earned or inherited. Any sort of money had purchasing power on an open market. The sight of such a blonde, blue-eyed and pretty young woman strapped to a hutchie daunted even the pragmatic manager. He could not clinch his belief that he had discovered the Moodie heiress. He dawdled for a couple of days, mulling over unanswerable questions and then, because he was a cautious man, decided to seek confirmation of his 'find' before proceeding.

From Olivia Melrose he had discovered that the Balnesmoor weaver had set aside a fund of unspecified amount, put into trust with the Farmers' Bank of Falkirk. Further discreet enquiry brought the information that the Farmers' Bank was partnered by Gilbert Bontine, whose brother was the laird of Balnesmoor and Ottershaw. It required no leap of the imagination to suppose that Gilbert Bontine would be in league with the lawyer in the case, Angus Hildebrand, that Gilbert Bontine would be *au fait*, as the French say, with the ins and the outs of the Moodie affair and would, if properly approached, disperse a few crumbs of the sort of information that he, Keir Bolderon, could not otherwise come by.

Nine days after his encounter with Elspeth in the upper level of the Abbeyfield, Keir Bolderon was seated before a large oak table in a very small office in Calderow Street, in the snug provincial burgh of Falkirk. Naturally, Keir Bolderon did not barge into Bontine's chambers and throw down the gauntlet. He did not mention the name Moodie, did not slip in a question about the errant wife, the legacy or anything at all that might put Bontine on his guard. He came under the guise of supplicant to sell to Gilbert Bontine the proposition that investment in a coalfield might benefit the Farmers' Bank of Falkirk and make profits for all concerned.

Keir Bolderon had become expert at putting his pitch. God knows he had had practice enough these past months. Once it became clear that Bontine knew nothing at all about mineral matters, and precious little about finance, Keir Bolderon laid the Moodie affair gently to one side for a while and concentrated his attention on selling the idea of 'sound investment' to the amateur banker.

Damn it all, Gilbert Bontine bit.

By the time the banker got around to asking salient questions, Keir Bolderon had the answers on the tip of his tongue.

"Ah – how much – ah – would be needed to participate in the expansion of the – ah – mine?" said Gilbert Bontine.

"One thousand pounds, sir."

"Oh!" said Gilbert. "I had thought it would be more."

Keir Bolderon groaned inwardly at the man's awful naivety. It was like stealing from a blind man's tray.

"One thousand pounds will, of course, purchase only a percentage of my share of the total income derived over the period of the new lease agreement."

Gilbert pursed his lips. "What sort of percentage?"

"Eight percentage," said Keir Bolderon.

"I do not understand why you have not found an investor already," said Gilbert.

"Advancement money is required. Certain short-sighted people are reluctant to make short-term loans," said Keir Bolderon.

"Advancement money?"

"To open the new seams."

"Ah!" said Gilbert. "Do you mean that you need to develop a new seam before the owner of the land will incorporate you in the sharing of the new lease on the – ah – the Abbeyfield?"

"The new seam will be developed regardless," said Keir Bolderon.

"Regardless of what?"

"Of my participation."

"I thought you were the engineer?"

"I am, of course. But it is incumbent upon me to employ a team of borers to sink discovery shafts. For that I require investment capital."

"How did you come to think of the Falkirk Farmers' Bank in this connection?" said Gilbert.

"On the recommendation of Mrs Melrose."

"Mistress Melrose! Oh!"

"Is something amiss, Mr Bontine?"

"On the contrary. It's just that I'm – ah – involved in a peripheral way in a financial matter that may lead to litigation. I'm surprised at Mrs Melrose raising my name at all."

The threads of the conversation were becoming too tangled. Keir Bolderon decided to give a sharp little tug to one of the strands to see what might be unravelled.

"The Moodie trust fund," he said. "Yes, Mrs Melrose did make mention of it."

"There's no confliction of interest, that I can see," said Gilbert uncertainly.

"Is the heiress still missing?"

"In my opinion she's gone to America and might never be traced."

"In that case what will happen to the fund?"

"In the fullness of time it will be restored to the secondary heirs, one of whom, of course, is the estimable Mrs Melrose."

"From the little I know of law," said Keir Bolderon, "that process will take an age."

"Indeed, an eternity," Gilbert Bontine agreed. "The more so as the lawyer who drafted the testament is very shrewd and experienced."

"Is he – the lawyer – also your adviser?"

"No. He's adviser to my brother Randall."

Keir Bolderon suppressed a sigh of relief. "What if the heiress is discovered?"

"Naturally the fund will be restored to her at once – an occurrence that will not take place too soon, I hope."

"Why so?" asked Keir Bolderon. "Have you invested it?"

"It's become part of the bank's capital stock."

"It's certainly an intriguing affair," said Keir Bolderon, "what little I have gleaned of it."

"Her sister, the heiress's sister, is also in my employment," Gibbie confessed.

"Is she indeed? In what capacity?"

"Domestic ser – housekeeper."

"Has she no clue as to where her sister may be found?"

"None whatsoever," said Gilbert. "However, Mr Bolderon, you did not come to Falkirk to exchange village gossip, I'm sure. Tell me more about the Abbeyfield and what sort of yield an investor might expect from it?"

This Mr Bolderon was only too delighted to do, give or take an ounce of truth.

The man who capped it all, as far as Elspeth was concerned, was keelman Georgie Haynes. Even without his unwelcome reappearance into her life, it is probable that she would not have allowed herself to sink into the hopeless oblivion of brute labour for her quick mind, and her experience of the world outside the environs of a coal pit, gave her choices and the reason to make choices, a privilege denied to other women who slaved along the tunnels, harnessed to hutchies.

Mouse had sunk into a depression, but it was boredom and a feeling that she had slipped in status that galled the younger girl. 'Trapping' was for children. She was not a child. She had pulled for the best collier in all Scotland. She had earned cake, not bread. Now she was back on that spot from which the children of the poor began their climb – and she blamed Elspeth for it. Elspeth could not cope with Mouse's girning. She ignored the girl, concentrated what strength she could muster in attending to Davy and to her daughter. She could not see that Mouse had much to complain about. Mouse was comfortable enough on a little stool under the vent of the old Dead Man shaft and had naught to do but tug upon a rope. The trap, a wooden square hinged to a frame, was certainly heavy but Mouse was wiry-strong and the weight of it was well within her coping. Comparison, rivalry, bitterness crept in and tainted whatever protective feelings there had been in Elspeth for the spoiled young girl.

Mary Jean, sensing her mammy's distraction, also fretted for more attention than Elspeth could give, and roasted Sarah Bennet during daylight hours. Sarah even dared to suggest that she might be better down below. The extra shillings could be used to pay minder-fee so that Mary Jean might go to school. Elspeth would not have it. There was Davy to consider. For the present, Davy required a nurse; who better than Sarah to fill that role?

It was on a hot still night that Georgie Haynes found Dutch courage and, made aware by tittle-tattle of the Bennets' situation, left Lewis and the Skipper on the *Matchless* and set out for the cottage across the Rutherford burn.

Trade was slack on the keels. Domestic coals were not in great demand in warming weather and the boats plied the river, picking up bits of cargo here and there on instructions from one of McNeil's agents, taking only what coal the market would bear from the alpine heap by the lading quay.

Since it was Wednesday, and the *Matchless* had not made shore until seven, Placket was no place for a keelman to find pleasure. The crew had scoffed a supper of tough beef and neat gin, the latter in such quantity that Lewis and the Skipper were flat on the after deck even before the sun slid down above the Kincardine crossings. Georgie, thus, was left alone. He was not nearly drunk enough to be incapable of brooding or for the hot night air to fan his ardour for the belle of the Forth, the princess of the pit villages, for Elspeth Patterson who, he had learned, was 'widowed' and alone.

Mellowed into stupidity by gin, Georgie told himself that he would go to offer condolences, play the gentleman without candy talk or ill design. He nodded to affirm the role he had chosen, while in his belly lust flickered and he suffered instinctual need to take a woman. Georgie was incapable of understanding how it was with the Bennets and Elspeth Patterson; a death to him was a thing of the moment. He was of the type that could bury a brother at eleven and be carousing in a tavern at noon, unaware that he was dumb and callous and, by the lights of more civilised men, a case beyond redemption. Georgie Haynes believed that he was only being a man, which in his way he was.

He came not by the shore track but via the by-lane that crossed to the turnpike, and by a plank bridge over the Rutherford burn. He had never ventured here before and would not have dared to do so now if he had not convinced himself that he had no intent but kindness in his heart. He expected any colliers that he might chance to meet to accept his word at face value, to see the change within. Composed and outwardly calm, he came to the door of the Bennets' cottage and, glancing this way and that like a dog shaking a shackle, lifted his fist, knocked once and entered.

The boy in the bed was clad in a white cotton shirt and might have been dead. It took Georgie Haynes a moment to realise that this was the fierce wee tyke who had swung at him with a stave not so many weeks ago. But the boy, propped against a bolster, arms by his sides, gave not one stir or murmur and his eyes remained closed.

Georgie uttered a soft grunt of surprise. He thought that he had entered into a laying-out, one in which the watchers had abandoned their charge for, on first glance, the kitchen room was otherwise empty; then he saw her. She was hunkered down, a blanket drawn about her, a rough and dirty towel pressed against the fold where her breasts would be if she had been mature. Her eyes were on him, scowling, awed.

"I – I heard the old 'un was dead," Georgie whispered. "Is the young 'un dead too?"

There was no candle to light the place. The fire in the hearth was low. The girl-child had been washing, a bowl at her knee. She was naked, or nearly so. As Georgie closed the door behind him with the flat of his hand she jerked and quailed and he saw the blanket slip and expose bare legs and thighs. He darted a glance at the boy, let his gaze linger until he detected the rise and fall of his little pigeon chest; then he took another step and looked over the table and into the corner where the girl had found privacy.

"Which're you, sweetheart?" he asked.

"I'm – I'm Mouse."

"Mouse in your corner, by your hole, eh?"

"She's out," Mouse managed.

"Where? Wi' a collier lad?"

"Takin' the air wi' Mary Jean an' our Sarah."

Georgie Haynes had a vague recollection of the infant and the younger girl but was distracted from his pursuit of Elspeth Patterson by a growing feeling of aggression that shifted his immediate interest from the pretty blonde woman to the vulnerable girl-child.

"An' what were you doin'?"

"Wa – washin'."

"What age are you?"

"Six – sixteen."

"Sixteen, eh! Why, you're near growed up."

"Aye."

Though she feared him she did not seek to avoid him. Of all men Georgie Haynes knew what that signified. He shifted closer. He lifted and laid aside a stool, making a minimum of noise. Now that she was clean he saw in Mouse new and unnoticed features. His purpose, which had not been focused, altered and became specific. It was not tenderness, nor anything as daft as love, that had brought him here in the first place, but a desire to impose. He might do that as well, or better, with the quivering young thing in the corner than with a woman who could compare him with other men.

"Come here t'me, lass," he cajoled, holding out a hand.

"I – I canna."

"Do ye not know who I am?"

"Aye, you're Georgie Haynes."

"What d' the lassies say about me?"

She blushed and looked away.

Georgie brought the stool into a new position. Blocking her in the corner by the dresser, he seated himself, knees spread. Seated thus, he appeared solid and steady, the threat of him reduced.

"Come on, I'll no' eat you, Mouse."

She was frightened. They were always frightened. But she was eager too. He knew all about the state, with fear pushing and need pulling.

"Here," he said. "Sit on my knee."

She shook her head.

Georgie Haynes laughed. He put his fingers into his pocket and brought out a coin, a shilling. He held it up.

"I'll gi'e ye this; a present. Sit on my knee, be nice t'me."

"She'll be back soon."

"Nah, nah."

"She will."

"She's not your bloody mammy, is she?"

The girl's brown eyes fastened on the shilling. He extended it in finger and thumb, then brought it towards him. She followed it as meek as a pet lamb on a string.

"Come on, m' sweetheart," he murmured. "Come an' see what Georgie's got for ye."

When she reached for the shilling he put his arm about her. She was of a height with him, him sitting. His face and the girl's face squared to each other. Her little tongue darted out and wetted her lips. There was a gleam in her expression that Georgie took for yielding. He had a sudden urge to drag her to the floor there and then for he was excited by her knowingness as much as her innocence. Her tiny body, his hand told him, was not that of a child at all. Mouse was a woman, with all a woman's attributes in miniature. He found the opening in the blanket and insinuated his fingers through it. He turned his hand and cupped her little round bottom. She sighed. She shivered. She sank against him. Her hand closed over his fist, over the shilling. Her grasp on the blanket slackened. It fell from her. He could see white flesh in the gloom, the girl's body as fine and filigree as something carved out of whalebone. He put a hand to her breast. He put his mouth upon her lips. She rubbed herself against him like a cat. He did not have to coax her now, just make sure that he did not send her into a panic with his ardour or his haste to connect. He was pleased with himself, with the venture. Here was a clean sweet virgin worth more than the prettiest woman on any shore. He liked to be first, to leave the memory of his manliness with daft girls, spoil them for what came after.

"Do ye like that, Mouse?" he whispered huskily.

"Aye."

"Sit," he said. "Sit just here."

She closed her eyes, modestly. She let him guide her down on to his lap. She had just enough weight to tell. He shifted himself back a little on the stool, drawing her closer, tighter.

"Do ye like that too?" he murmured into her ear.

She opened her eyes quick, flaringly. She twisted her head n fright. Georgie Haynes gripped her forcefully with his left arm and went for his mark. It was not panic that had caused the girl's reaction. Georgie, distracted by the clang behind him, glanced away from her.

The base of the heavy iron cooking-pot struck him on the temple. He glimpsed hatred in the boy's face, the stick-thin arm, the scoring of his cotton shirt. He felt the girl drop from him. Then there was only a red vibrating pain that swelled within his head, changed into black sand and, before he could cry out, swamped his consciousness completely. Georgie Haynes fell from the stool on to the floor. His legs twitched, toppling the stool, jarring the table. Blood oozed from his bruised temple, trickled like a thread from one ear. He gagged; then was still.

Barefoot and weak, Davy kicked him, ineffectually. All Davy's strength had gone into lifting and swinging the cooking-pot. Now he was flushed with fury. He danced over Georgie Haynes, rounded on Mouse who, big-eyed, stood by the keelman's feet staring down at him.

Davy spat out a filthy name, slapped his sister across the cheek. She hardly seemed to notice the stinging blow. She was riven by the felling of a man so large and handsome, so much n command of her, as Georgie Haynes had been. She slipped to her knees, touched her fingers to Georgie's brow, then, in amazement, hissed, "Davy, you've kilt him. You've kilt the keelman dead."

It was no unusual sight to encounter colliers on that part of the strand. The Abbeyfield was behind them and the curve of the bay tricked the eye into seeing only the rural prospect of Mr Fotheringham's parks and gardens with a glimpse of the house far off in the painted trees. In June, at that hour, the sun was reluctant to leave the sky and the vista of the river was calmly beautiful.

Ripening crops in the fields on the further shore reminded Elspeth rather too painfully of those hot, immortal evenings on the hills above Balnesmoor when she and Anna mooned over boys and marriage and the infinite possibilities of a future full of summers. She was sore, though. The stiffness in her hips and the small of her back had not eased with walking. She could not lift Mary Jean and carry her for the grip became too much to bear after a step or two. The child had to be content to hold on to Mammy's hand and, with Sarah on the other side, to swing her little legs from the ground now and then until Elspeth, aching in arms and shoulders too, would quietly say, "Enough."

A posy of wild flowers, picked by Mary Jean, was tucked into the buttons of Elspeth's dress. Their faint, subtle fragrance overlaid the warm salty tang of high-tide weed. In spite of her aches and pains she was pleased to be out and about on a night so fine and reluctant to turn for home.

Also enjoying the fine spell of weather, young husbands and young wives strolled hand in hand, renewing romance. A group of friends, women and men, shared a jug of ale on a knoll by the end of the old Preston Island wagon-way. Elderly widows, modestly wrapped in shawls and mutches, sauntered arm in arm along the little path by the unspoiled strand, the westering sun ruddy on their wrinkled cheeks. On dry tussocks, here and there, hewers collected to pass a bottle about, puff their clays and laugh in contented peaceful tones.

Elspeth, Sarah and Mary Jean had just turned into the stretch that overlooked Mr Fotheringham's land. Rooks were settling their squabbles in the massive elms and the shadow of the head-high bank fell long to the rippling river. Walking by the side of a grey pony, hand upon its rein, the man came casually around the curve of the path. He did not falter when he caught sight of the three but he did not at first pay them any particular attention. His head was raised, admiring the view, a pleasant smile upon his lips, topper tipped back. Though he did not ride – the pony was hardly of a size for a full-grown man to saddle – he was clad in a neat unostentatious frock-coat and hessian boots and carried a peeled willow branch as a switch.

"See who it is?" said Sarah under her breath.

Mary Jean stopped in her tracks. To the little girl the pony must have seemed as large as an elephant and the man, in such gentlemanly garb, almost as rare.

"Good evening to you, ladies. My! Is it not a grand night?"

Mr Bolderon paused. The pony checked obediently and shook its head as if in greeting too. Mr Bolderon tipped the top hat and gave a bow. It might have been Princes Street or the Calton Hill and they dames of New Edinburgh for the sort of courtesy he displayed. Elspeth was surprised to find the manager here upon a common walk, more surprised when he gave them such a generous greeting. More, however, was to come.

"Mistress Patterson, is it not?"

"Yes, Mr Bolderon."

"The wee one's yours if I'm not mistaken." He cocked his head and winked at Mary Jean who, sensing no threat, did her coy little act and peeped out at him from behind Mammy's skirts. Mr Bolderon stooped, hands on knees, and addressed himself to her. "And what, pray, is your name?"

"Go on," Sarah urged. "Tell the gentleman."

"Mary Jean."

"Mary Jean," said Mr Bolderon as if it was an amazing revelation. "My! But that is a pretty name."

Mary Jean giggled. Already she recognised flattery when she heard it. She took a step from behind Elspeth and then stepped back.

Keir Bolderon raised himself and addressed Elspeth.

"It's a far cry this from the levels," he said.

Elspeth felt a certain shame at his mention of the underground tunnels. It was as if he was reminding her of the moment of their last encounter, that he had seen her half-naked, black with dirt and sweat. She murmured agreement. She had not really taken notice of Mr Bolderon's appearance before. He belonged to a different class from the rest of the men of the Abbeyfield, or so she supposed. Now she saw that he was not at all refined but had a pock-marked coarseness lurking there, a quality that the frock-coat and oratory could not quite cover up. She became, in that instant, less wary of her employer.

She said, "If I may ask, Mr Bolderon, is the pony a pet?"

He grinned. "A fair supposition, Mrs Patterson. It's an old beast I brought with me from – from my last position. It lives in a stable behind my house an' every so often I take it, as now, for a gentle lope."

"Pony," said Mary Jean.

Elspeth and Keir Bolderon looked down at the little girl.

"Her name's Thistle," Keir Bolderon said. "She's very fond of givin' rides to wee lassies, provided they know how to sit still upon her back."

There was something wrong; Elspeth sensed it. She felt drawn to Mr Bolderon. It was of his doing, a deliberate manoeuvre. The pony had been brought for just this purpose, to amuse Mary Jean. The meeting here on the common path had not been by accident. Elspeth's caution returned. But Keir Bolderon with his frank brown eyes and candid expression did not seem to be wolfish, not in that manner; not like Randall Bontine who had so enthralled her sister Anna as to make her his mistress.

Keir Bolderon said, "If your mam'll give permission, perhaps you'd like a ride on Thistle's back, Mary Jean?"

With eyes like saucers Mary Jean stared up at her mother, putting Elspeth into a situation which she could not now avoid.

Sarah said, "It's a nice quiet cuddy, Elspeth."

To Sarah, Keir Bolderon said, "Would you like to ride too?"

"Aye."

"Thistle's got a spine like iron. I'm sure she could manage two wee slips at the same time," Keir Bolderon said. "Mrs Patterson, what do you say?"

"The girls would – would enjoy it."

Elspeth wondered what the colliers would have to say to it when she was seen in such close communion with the manager of the Abbeyfield, what sort of malice the tongues would weave out of the innocent encounter. Perhaps the gossips had some justification for their tales. It was a weird thing, this amiable meeting, planned in advance and prolonged far beyond mere politeness. Manager and strapper should not mix. She boxed for a reason in vain.

"Hup then."

Without hesitation, Keir Bolderon put his strong hands about Sarah's waist, lifted and set her upon the soft saddle that was strapped over the pony's back.

Sarah gasped, her soberness swept aside by the magic of it. She clung to Thistle's mane with both fists. Mary Jean was put in front of her and the reins were given to the elder girl. Keeping a close eye on the passengers, while appearing not so to do, Mr Bolderon hooked a finger into the bar of Thistle's bridle and led the docile old animal forward along the path. Elspeth walked, rather anxiously, by the flank, trying not to coddle the girls with overmuch fuss.

Keir Bolderon glanced across at her. "You'll have ridden many a pony in your day, I suppose?"

Elspeth said, "Aye, one or two."

"Horses too?"

"Och no, Mr Bolderon. I'm no gentlewoman."

"I meant in your drovin' days."

He had enquired about her. He had taken on the half-lie she had told to Jock Bennet, the 'history' that was accepted all about the Abbeyfield. Why had the manager expressed such interest in her? She began to fret again and to curse herself for her suspicious nature and for spoiling the pleasure of the evening. And a pleasure it was to hear Mary Jean giggle at the rolling gait of the fat old pony, to hear, for the first time, Sarah Bennet laugh aloud as Thistle plodded on along the path. Elspeth had almost forgotten how the simple, unexpected things in life could surprise the heart and open it to joy, particularly in childhood. She saw just how much Sarah Bennet had sacrificed to a regime of duty and responsibility.

"It was a drover you were married to, was it not?"

Elspeth came out of her reverie. "Yes, sir."

"I had an aunt who married a drover," Keir Bolderon confessed. "It was a great scandal in our family at the time."

"One need not ask why," said Elspeth.

"Ah, no. Not for the ordinary reason."

She was tempted to press for the extraordinary reason but thought better of it. It was not right for her to slip into familiarity. However, she had met many like Keir Bolderon among James's associates, eager, urgent men who strove for advancement, power and wealth but were not entirely devoid of scruples in gaining their ends.

Keir Bolderon said, "Are you a born Highlander? You do not speak like one."

"I was born in – in – by Glasgow."

"Met your husband at a tryst, no doubt."

"Yes."

"What drew you to the Abbeyfield, Mrs Patterson? It's a far piece from Glasgow and opposed to the open life of a drover."

"It was – as it happened. I was in need of work."

"Would your parents not take you in?"

"They are dead, sir."

"I see," said Keir Bolderon.

He let it rest and did not return to the subject.

As they came past the strand and on to the path by the open shore they encountered other colliers. Now there was no nod of greeting, no cheerful remark about the weather. In silence they stepped swiftly aside, tripping, some of the older women, over the tussocks and falling and lying there as if the sight of one of theirs with one of them had wounded them mortally. Hewers too, caught at leisure, stood when Mr Bolderon appeared and doffed their caps as if the pony led a funeral procession. Elspeth, they ignored.

When Sarah called out to Mr Ogilvie, "See me, Mr Ogilvie. I'm ridin' a cuddy," the amiable hewer averted his gaze as if she had come naked before him like a young Godiva.

Sarah was too excited to be aware of hostility. She called out to other colliers and was mimicked by Mary Jean. Only Elspeth felt the flush of an unjustified shame creep across her cheek. She dropped back a pace as if to disassociate herself from the unusual parade.

It was over in a quarter of an hour. It ended where the wagon track, rotting into sour grasses, cut away towards the Placket road.

"Well, ladies, it's time I was away," said Keir Bolderon. He plucked Mary Jean from the saddle and put her on the ground. "I've to see Mr Rance before bedtime an' he puts his head down early, you know." Sarah Bennet gave a long sigh as the manager swung her from Thistle's back and held her, ust for a moment, with her toes an inch above the path. It's been a pleasure to meet with you. Thistle has not had uch an adventure for many a long day. Is that not correct, uddy?"

Thistle spluttered assent and the manager stroked the pony's nuzzle fondly. He made no particular thing of parting. He ouched the topper, bowed, and was gone almost before ilspeth remembered her manners.

"Thank you, Mr Bolderon. It was a kind of thing t' do for he girls."

"Goodnight, Mrs Patterson."

"Goodnight to you, sir," Elspeth said.

None of them moved. The girls and the young woman emained fixed at the junction of the paths, watching the nanager lead his old pony away into the russet grasses.

"Well," Elspeth said, "was it fun, Mary Jean?"

"Cuddy. Nice cuddy. Fistle's her name so the mannie said."

Before Elspeth could put the question to Sarah Bennet, owever, Sarah was away. All her pent-up energy seemed at nce released and, skipping and leaping, Sarah rushed home o tell her sister, Mouse, what an event she had missed by oitering indoors that special summer night.

Vhatever myth there was about keelmen having skulls as thick s rock had, in the case of Georgie Haynes, proved horribly vrong.

He was still sprawled where he had fallen when Elspeth ame into the Bennets' cottage a quarter of an hour later. She ound Mouse, Sarah and Davy in varying states of numbness t the enormity of the crime.

"Davy done it. Davy hit him wi' a pot. Davy, not me," Mouse shouted, the instant Elspeth appeared.

The girl had dressed herself. She sat on a stool with a blanket bout her, though the air in the kitchen was stifling, wringing ier hands and lamenting in a low, drawling voice. Sarah, who iad intruded into this scene only minutes before, had done vhat Sarah did best: she had filled a kettle from the bucket nd put it on the chain, had poked up the coals in the hearth nd fed in fresh kindling. Licks of flame were already eating nto the wood raising shadows in the depths of the room.

Wheezing like a leather bellows, Davy sat on the side of the bed in his new-washed nightshirt, staring into space, shaking his head from time to time.

Elspeth felt Mary Jean crowd against her legs. Not wishing her daughter to see the dead man, she found her voice. "Sarah, take Mary Jean out for a quarter of an hour. Don't go far away. I'll call for you shortly."

"Aye." Off Sarah went, dragging the reluctant child by the hand. It was late now. Mary Jean was fractious. Elspeth could hear her crying petulantly as Sarah led her away.

Elspeth did not offer Mouse comfort. Mouse did not seem in need of it. It was from Davy that she elicited an account of the keelman's intrusion, his attempt to seduce Mouse and, Davy hinted, Mouse's acquiescence.

"Was it just a pot you hit him with?" Elspeth asked.

"Aye."

"Hard?"

"Hard as I could."

Davy wept. Not Mouse. She was hard-eyed and furious with resentment at her brother.

"What'll we do, Elspeth?" Davy cried. "They'll hang me for sure."

While she had been comforting Davy, however, Elspeth had been studying the keelman's body. She had seen more than enough to realise that George Haynes was very far from dead. She got down on her knees beside him, untied his shirt, touched the flat of her hand to his chest. The thud-thump of his heart was as strong as the pump of a donkey engine. His breathing was shallow, however, and he remained insensible to all that was going on about him.

"How long ago did it happen?"

"About – about twenty minutes ago," said Davy. "He's dead, is he no'?"

"He's no more dead than I am," said Elspeth.

"Oh, Christ Jesus!" Scrambling, Davy got himself on to the bed and, legs tucked under him, pressed himself against the wooden board as if he expected Haynes to leap out of stupefaction and be at his throat with bare hands.

"You gave him a fair crack, Davy," said Elspeth.

"He wanted me," said Mouse. "He wanted me t' kiss—"

“Hold quiet, Allison,” Elspeth said. “Look outside. Tell me ow dark it is an’ if anybody’s about.”

“Do what ye’re told, ye wee bitch,” Davy shouted, holding hand to his chest as if to squeeze breath enough to make the ommand. “It’s all your bloody fault.”

Mouse snapped the blanket about her like a ceremonial robe nd stalked out of the door into the twilight.

“Davy,” said Elspeth in a whisper, “did Haynes – you now, did he harm her?”

“She wanted it. She could’ve woke me easy. For all I know he egged him on.”

“But he didn’t—”

“She was on his knee. He was – was touchin’ her.”

“Very well,” said Elspeth. “Are you strong enough to take is legs an’ help me drag him outside?”

“I’m strong enough,” said Davy, though he did not seem o. “But should we no’ send for Mr Rance? The keelman eggar shouldna be here at all.”

“I’ll not involve Mr Rance or any other. It’s our business n’ we’ll have to sort it out for ourselves.”

“Because Mouse egged him on?”

“Yes,” said Elspeth impatiently, though that was not her notive for wanting Georgie Haynes clear of the cottage before e recovered his wits. She had noticed the blood trickling from is ear, the contusion on his temple and knew that, within econds of his coming to his senses, Georgie Haynes would be n pain and roaring for revenge. She feared the keelman more han anything. If Haynes returned tomorrow breathing fire nd smoke then, of course, she would set up a clatter that vould rouse the neighbours and they would defend the patch rom the keelman as they would have, in days of old, from an ttack by a bear or boar. But she did not want to be dependent pon the community, to demonstrate the vulnerability of her osition. She certainly did not want to have to summon Thomas Rance for protection. Being rid of Haynes was all she ould think of to do.

Mouse returned. “It’s no’ dark yet,” she said. “But it’s quiet nough. There’s folk comin’ up from the river path but they’re ehind the house, over the burn.”

“Grasp his foot,” said Elspeth.

"What—"

"Bloody do as you're told, Mouse," Davy wheezed.

It took all their combined strength to move the keelman, to drag him across the floor and over the threshold and, even as he began to groan and wag his right arm limply, to pull him over the dusty foreyard towards the plank bridge.

Hand in hand, Sarah and Mary Jean hovered not far off, watching. For them it had been a strange, strange evening: a pony ride and a meeting with Mr Bolderon and now Mammy dragging a keelman across the ground, with Davy in his nightshirt and Mouse in a blanket helping her.

When they reached the plank over the burn, Elspeth paused. She straightened, glanced this way and that. Mouse's report had been accurate. Colliers and wives were all on the river side. The high, rising bank of alders and little birch trees was deserted. She thought of pulling Georgie Haynes into them, leaving him hidden there, but the man was recovering quickly, too quickly. He thrashed his head from side to side. His lids fluttered and his fists balled, clenching and slackening. She wondered if he had been in drink when he had arrived and if spirits still clouded his brain.

"Push," said Elspeth.

"What?"

"Push him into the burn."

"We canna do that t' Georgie," Mouse cried. "He'll drown."

"In two foot o' water?" Davy drove his heel into Georgie Haynes' side, rolling him forward to the edge. "A keelman'll no' drown in that, more's the bloody pity. Heave, Mouse, or I'll skelp your ear."

Georgie Haynes went into the lentic waters of the burn with all the grace of a pike with a gaff through its gills. He struck the scummy surface with shoulders, torso and legs. His tormentors, Elspeth included, stood for a moment on the bank as his head went under. One, two, three seconds passed. Georgie rose again. Heaving upward, retching and spluttering, slime dripping from his hair, he roared and fell back with a huge blanketing splash.

Herding the Bennets before her Elspeth ran for the cottage. Once they were all inside she dropped the bar across the door, rammed a chair against it and waited, the children about her, watching the cottage door, like little things in a grisly fairytale. But Georgie Haynes did not come to blow it down. Georgie Haynes had had enough, for the time being.

SEVEN

Welcome to the Babylon

For weeks now Anna had been meekness itself. Gone were the tempers and tantrums, gone too her effervescent cheerfulness. She was not merely sulking. There were no scowls upon her brow, no darting black looks. In the wake of the Ottershaw ball she had become hang-dog and submissive, cowed by Randall's dismissal rather than the horrid dressing-down she had received from Alicia Bontine and the sarcasm of Cat Sinclair. To everyone, Sandy included, it seemed that Anna had at last learned her place. She obeyed every order. She plied the hoe in the pea-rigs and greening barley, trod blankets, scoured pots, even dusted the long hall without a mutter of protest or a pretence of incompetence. She gave attention only to Robbie, but she no longer shared the boy. She did not go out of her way to show him off, was guarded and selfish in caring for him.

The news that rumbled down from Balnesmoor of Jamie Moodie's drowning and the reappearance of long-lost sisters, of a war over the contents of the will, did not seem to impinge upon Anna's melancholy state. She listened to supper-table conversations without a word, asked no questions, offered no opinions when Elspeth's name was raised and speculation was rife about her sister's hiding-place, the reason why she had fled from marriage to the weaver mannie.

Anna, however, was not so indrawn and detached as she seemed. She was, after all, Gaddy Patterson's daughter and a natural schemer. She was not so wounded by Randall Bontine's rejection that she could not see in this latest turn of events certain interesting possibilities that might restore the benefits that she had lost to the winsome bitch from Piperhaugh.

Anna did not know enough of law to calculate the portion of Moodie's fortune that might fall to Elspeth. She felt sure, though, that Elspeth would hear of it. Even now, 'Pet might be bundling up her belongings, wrapping Mary Jean in a travelling-shawl preparatory to coming back to Balnesmoor to claim her dues. Tales of the appearance of Moodie's sisters worried Anna. She had a peasant's instinctive fear of 'society women', which she believed the pair to be. She could imagine them wheedling the whole of the Moodie fortune away from the Pattersons by devious stratagems. While she hoed in the barley field, swept out old straw from the stable or lugged piles of wet wash from basket to tub, her brain was highly active. She concentrated on the practical business of protecting Elspeth against the predations of the 'Edinburgh' ladies and wove fanciful plots of her own. Of course she could not storm into Mr Hildebrand's chambers in Dumbarton, even if she could steal a day to make the long ride; nor dared she write him a letter begging information. Such a missive would certainly be shown to Randall or Mr Gibbie and she would find herself on the carpet for meddling. Nonetheless Anna needed facts, hard facts from somebody 'in the know'. After much careful thought she came to the conclusion that the only person who might be able to help her, and who would not sneak to the Bontines, was Robert Rudge, manager of the Kennart mill and a man with an eye for the ladies.

Once decided, Anna patiently prepared herself to beard Mr Rudge in his lair. She did not know him at all well, though Elspeth had once told her, with a disapproving 'tut', that Mr Rudge had made a remark about her figure and had enquired once or twice, in a sly manner, after Anna's welfare. Admiration from men of discernment Anna considered no more than her due. After all, she had attracted not just the eye but the love of the laird of Ottershaw and, by comparison, Robert Rudge was naught but the hireling of a common weaver.

To make contact with Mr Rudge was not so easy. His home was in Drymen, his office above the mill at Kennart. He was not the sort of bachelor who did much dining out these days. It was a fair few miles to Drymen from Strachan but Anna could devise no other means of encountering the manager and, after three or four days of puzzling over the problem, she elected to confront him directly at his house.

It would have to be done on the Sabbath. She would have to dodge the family visit to the kirk and, though she would have preferred it otherwise, would have to carry little Robbie with her since she could not leave him alone in the empty castle. She feigned a cramp and was duly left behind when the procession went off, master, mistress, servants and children dutifully tramping into the hot June sunshine in their hot sombre clothes.

"Will I not stay wi' you?" Sandy asked.

Anna said, "For what reason?"

"In case you've need of—"

She claimed female intimacy in the nature of the pain and Sandy, blushing to the tips of his ears, retreated after his family without more ado.

With Robbie in a light cotton dress and sun-bonnet, armed with a flask of small beer tapped from the house barrel, Anna set off across the Lightwater as soon as the Bontines' retainers had cleared the front gate. She calculated that she would make the distance in three hours, even on such a hot, cloudless day. If Mr Rudge was the sort to occupy a pew in Drymen parish, which Anna doubted, she would reach his house about the same time as he returned from kirk.

Mr Robert Rudge had long ago given up the pretence of being a devoted Christian. He considered the length and hellfire nature of sermons to be most un-Christian, to show no consideration for the congregation and no charity at all. He had not crossed the kirk door in many years. He was 'respectable' enough, however, to pass Sunday discreetly out of sight of the good folk of Drymen and was comfortably sprawled in the shade of an old yew tree in the garden at the rear of the house when Anna discovered him.

Anna was sticky and flushed. Robbie had had to be carried most of the way to add to her discomfort and ten miles had seemed like forty. Tentatively she came into the garden. The front door of the house was open to keep the place cool but Anna did not knock upon the brass fist since she did not know what sort of servants Mr Rudge kept or what their attitude to strangers might be.

To Robert Rudge Anna Sinclair did not appear in the least flustered. At first he thought it might be a mirage of the heat for he had cast an expert eye in Anna's direction from a distance and had watched her bud and blossom and had thought what a waste it was that she had married a coarse lout like Matt Sinclair when, in a more perfect world, she might have been employed to serve him comfortably upstairs as well as down. It had not surprised Robert Rudge when the hot-blooded and autocratic Randall Bontine had snipped her up for his pleasure. He admired the laird for exercising his 'rights' without hypocrisy. What Rudge saw then, coming around the corner of the gable, was an opportunity.

What Anna saw was a haggard handsome man snoozing after a good noon dinner, all unbuttoned and cool and, in that private bower, depleted of authority.

"Mr Rudge?"

He rose to welcome her. He acknowledged Robbie, said what a fine wee chap he was, brought a bench from behind the yew and put it adjacent to the wooden seat upon which he had been reclining. He would have sent for wine, for beef, for fresh milk for the boy, for anything that Anna had requested, though he did not mention just yet that his servants had been dismissed for the afternoon and had gone off to call upon relatives and that the house stood empty and tempting.

Anna found his affability disconcerting. The setting did not seem right for the exercise of feminine wiles nor for Robert Rudge's style of approach to pretty young women. But good looks were Anna's stock in trade, that and a mind sharper than she was ever given credit for.

Rudge said, "I can guess why you have come here, Mrs Sinclair."

"Tell me an' I'll tell you if you're right, Mr Rudge."

"For information."

"Of what sort?" said Anna teasingly.

"Information about Jamie Moodie's money," Robert Rudge stated.

Smiling, Anna nodded. She slipped Robbie from her lap and let him toddle off to explore a pyramid of earthenware pots by the flowerbeds, watching him, though, out of the corner of her eye. She settled herself on the bench, fluttered out her bodice, and fanned herself with her bonnet.

Robert Rudge relaxed, legs crossed.

Anna did not feel out of place. The house was not particularly imposing and Robert Rudge's reputation was, she had to admit, no worse than her own.

Brown bees hummed in the flower gardens, snouting for blooms. There were dainty butterflies for Robbie to chase along the rows of cabbage plantings. Floating up from the Endrick a breeze stirred the yew leaves and brought pleasant coolness to the shade.

"It's not for you, Anna Sinclair; Jamie's money," Rudge said. "I believe under the circumstances I might be permitted to call you Anna. I deplore formality out-of-doors, do you not?"

Anna said, "Why do you say I canna have share of the weaver's wealth? It never crossed my mind I'd have a claim on it."

"I'm sure it crossed your mind, Anna."

"My sister has claim on it, though, from what I know of law."

"The intricacies of the law are far beyond your understanding. Far beyond mine too," said Rudge. "Oh, I can cobble up a contract for wool wares, make a handclasp as bindin' as an iron band, and I am versed in what's called 'commercial procedures'. But the *real* laws, the laws of courts and settlements, those, alas, I must leave to experts."

"Experts like Mr Hildebrand?" said Anna.

"No doubt you encountered him at Ottershaw."

"Aye. He worked for Ran—for the laird."

"Hildebrand's no villain, Anna. He's on our side."

"Side?"

"Hildebrand's dedicated to keeping Moodie's greedy sisters at bay. James Simpson Moodie, God rest his soul, did not intend his years of toil to be squandered on ribbons an' bobs for jumped-up relatives."

"What're they like, the sisters?"

"Much like us, I suppose."

"There's a fair world o' difference between you an' me, Mr Rudge."

"Is there? I wonder." Rudge gave a laugh. "You're almost as talkative and perceptive as your sister, Anna."

"Elspeth an' I are not sisters."

"Ah, yes. Elspeth's a foundling. I forgot."

It was months since Anna had felt so much at ease. She had heard all the stories concerning Robert Rudge, though not so many of late, and she could see in the lined visage and sly eye that most of them were true. He was a man who had found his place, was content in it and would fight to retain it. It had not occurred to Anna before that Robert Rudge might be threatened by the closure of the Kennart mill and just as interested in Mr Hildebrand's doings as she was.

She embarked at once on a more direct line of questioning and found Mr Rudge surprisingly co-operative. He had questions of his own, of course, an exchange that she could not deny. His pointedness was disconcerting at the first but she squared to him and told him the truth, mostly, while Robbie played about the garden. Robert Rudge asked her about Matt, about her liaison with Randall Bontine, her standing at Strachan Castle. She could see that he was deeply curious, a true collector of gossip. She did not grudge him satisfaction.

In turn the manager of Kennart told her all that he had learned of James Moodie's mysterious death – suicide, without doubt – and the ingenious documents that Moodie had had drawn up and signed to protect the mill and preserve it for his wife and child.

"I'll never understand why she ran away," said Rudge.

Anna shook her head. "Right after the murder at Kennart, too."

"I've heard talk it had to do with your husband?" said Robert Rudge.

"No truth in that," said Anna.

"Can you be sure?"

"Sure as eggs," said Anna. "It was Moodie she ran from. She never went chasin' after Matt. Elspeth could not abide Matt. Small wonder."

"Did he treat you badly, Anna?" asked Robert Rudge, looking at the butterflies. "Did he – beat you?"

"Aye, he beat me."

"Did you not bring the beatings upon yourself?"

"He beat me long before I—" Anna paused. "There're certain things should not be mentioned in polite conversation, Mr Rudge. I'd like it better if we change the subject."

"Will you sue for a divorcement, Anna?"

Anna said, "I canna sue a man who's vanished."

"Desertion." Rudge shrugged.

"I've no reason to seek a divorcement."

"Do you want him back, is that it?"

"God Almighty, Mr Rudge! That's the last thing I want."

"Angus Hildebrand would, I'm sure, instruct you in the law."

"I canna afford a fancy lawyer's fee."

"I can."

Taken by surprise, Anna sat up and stopped fanning herself with her bonnet. "Why should you—"

"It would make you available, would it not? It would put you back upon the marriage market."

"I'm no heifer t' be bought an' sold."

"What of your son?" Robert Rudge gestured at Robbie. "Would it not be better for him to have a father?"

"Robbie's been baptised. He's legitimate issue," said Anna, who had picked up the term from Randall in another, less personal connection. "He has a father."

"Sinclair?" said Robert Rudge.

"My husband—"

"You know, Anna, that Randall Bontine's beyond your reach."

Anna had not anticipated this turn. She pouted, would not give a direct reply.

Rudge went on, "Our dear laird has picked himself a wife. He's made a wise, if not original, choice. There's no place for you or the laddie at Ottershaw, Anna. If you imagine that you might purchase the laird's interest by using your sister's new-found – or should I say un-found – fortune, then you're more of a fool than I took you for."

Robert Rudge spoke gently, without patronage or preaching. He did not pause when little Robbie toddled to his mother, climbed upon her knee and, with a weary sigh, settled his head upon her breast.

"I think, Anna, that you must make more of your life than you have done. Is it love turns you dizzy?"

"That's none o' your business, Mr Rudge."

"If you were free I'd marry you."

A sudden flash of fear came into Anna. She saw the equation with Elspeth, saw Rudge as Moodie; then the fear was gone.

"Aye," said Anna, with an insincere laugh, "I think you mean you'd bed me, Mr Rudge. Marriage is another matter."

"Oh, I'd bed you all right, Anna. It would not be a platonic relationship, whatever sort old Jamie Moodie forged. You see, I can read your mind. No, no, I'd not have you away in another room. I'd want you beside me to warm my bones, and other parts of me too."

Anna did not even blush. She had half expected Robert Rudge to seduce her, or try to, but she had not thought him imprudent enough to mention marriage.

"Why make this offer o' marriage when you might have me for a servant's wage, Mr Rudge?" said Anna. "You know I'm unhappy at Strachan Castle an', as you've pointed out, I'm not goin' to be welcomed back to Ottershaw. If you invited me to become your housekeeper I might be more inclined to accept."

"Marriage, Anna," said Robert Rudge. "I have a housekeeper. I do not have a wife."

Robbie had nodded off. Anna eased the child from the crook of her arm and laid him gently on the wooden bench, head on her shawl, her bonnet balanced on the seat's arm to shelter his face. She got to her feet and walked a short distance towards the brown earth rows where the cabbage plants were.

It was quiet here in the backwater of Drymen early on a Sabbath afternoon, quiet and peaceful.

Within the house she was sure she would find solid comforts. Warm fires would line the grates in winter, clean linen would adorn the beds, wholesome well-cooked meats would be served piping hot to the table. Mr Rudge would have money put away. He would not be penniless, and when his time came he would leave her secure. She turned and glanced at her son where he slept innocent and peaceful upon the bench in the shade of the great yew tree, glanced at Robert Rudge, legs crossed, one foot wagging slightly as he observed her every movement, admiring her, no doubt, and speculating on her hidden charms.

She said, "What if I do separate myself from Matt?"

"Then there will be no obstacle to marriage."

"Marriage is what you promise?"

"I said as much, Anna."

She came back towards him. "I canna understand it, Mr Rudge. I came here today out o' concern for my sister and her welfare, an' you spring a proposal on me as if you'd courted me for years. I hardly know you, Mr Rudge."

"I hardly know you, Anna. But that's no hindrance. Marriage would be beneficial to us both, would it not?"

"My sister married—"

"I'm *not* Jamie Moodie," said Robert Rudge. "I've blood in my veins for one thing. I would ask from you all the things a man expects from a wife."

"What things?"

"Tenderness, loving, a modicum of loyalty to me in my old age."

"Tell me, Mr Rudge, did you just see me today an' fancy I would suit your purpose or have I been on your mind?"

"You've been on my mind."

"Why did you not approach me, then?"

"How could I?"

"By letter. By arrangement."

Robert Rudge laughed cynically. "And have you mock me for a fool or a lecher. Show my letter to everyone."

"I would not."

"In any case, you came to me, Anna. I'm not so 'respectable' that I can't take you out of a servants' hall. It matters not to me that you were wife to an outlaw an' mistress of the laird of Ottershaw."

"Take me inside your house," Anna said, hands upon her hips. "Take me in there now. Robbie'll sleep for an hour or more. We'll not be disturbed."

Robert Rudge closed his eyes, bridged his fingers over his nose and gave a stifled groan as if inwardly pinched by habits of indulgence and capitulation. His foot wagged wildly then he opened his eyes, planted both heels on the ground and got up from the bench.

"Marriage," he said. "Marriage, Anna, is what I want."

"Do y' not want me?"

"Damn it, of course I want you. But are bachelors not entitled to have moral scruples too?"

"Tell me the true reason."

"I cannot trust myself not to become fond of you."

"Are you not – not fond of me now?"

"Of course I am. But I might change my mind. I do not wish to compromise you, Anna."

"Change your mind about me?"

"About marriage," Rudge said. "Now, come, lift the boy an' I'll find us a rig to run you back to Strachan Castle."

"Mr Rudge, have I or have I not been proposed to?" said Anna, frowning.

Rudge grinned. "Not yet."

"After my divorce?"

"And not a moment before," said Robert Rudge.

It was early afternoon when Elspeth embarked on the cattle-boat that would carry her from the Fife shore to the Port of Leith. She had planned to cross the river at the Queen's ferry but the carter who had picked her up on the Placket turnpike had been a friendly, helpful fellow and had suggested that it would be cheaper to make the trip from Dalgetty where passengers might mill in with cattle and sheep at a charge of a penny per head. Besides, the Dalgetty barge would land her in the heart of the old town and save her a long walk from the ferry landing. Elspeth heeded the carter's advice and, since he did not charge her for the extra miles, ran on with him to Dalgetty.

The stone ramps of the quays which dipped from paddocks above the bay were thronged with shaggy spring cattle and mutton culled out after lambing. It was hard for Elspeth to realise that this was no special day for boatmen and drovers who were obviously used to such chaos. The boatman's name was McEwan but for some unexplained reason he was known to all as Deadlie. The ports of the Forth were full of such characters but Elspeth was wary, equating the bargeman, unjustly, with strutting Georgie Haynes. Deadlie McEwan, though, was a harmless little whelk of a man, burned black by salt air and sunshine. He seemed to command the respect of everyone on the quays and to have a cheery greeting for all. Elspeth was surprised when, on taking her penny, he closed his sinewy fingers over her wrist and held her for a moment.

"Aye, you're a strange face, lassie. Is it Leith for you?"

"It is, sir."

"You'll no' have crossed wi' me before."

"No, I have not."

"Stand awa' up yonder then, out o' the ropes an' the slitter an' you'll see the finest sight in all Scotland: the Port o' Leith comin' o'er the Forth on a bonnie summer's day."

Deadlie directed Elspeth towards the prow, saw that she was settled before he let a second batch of cattle be driven off the ramp into the bed of the transport barge.

Elspeth found a wooden post to cling to while the boat waddled with the weight of live cargo. Sheep were jumped on board to fill vacant pens and drovers and Fifeshire fishers who had business in the city huddled on the stern deck, surrounded by bundles and travelling props. Smells mingled ripely in Elspeth's nostrils. She started when the big spritsail unfurled, seemingly of its own accord, to be followed by topsail and staysail. The bulk of canvas made the beasts afraid and they created a great roaring and kicking that brought a lurch of water swilling over the gunwale. On a rough day, Elspeth thought, the passage would be a drenching affair. She was glad that the weather was fair and glassy. Invisible breezes filled the canvases. Two lads adroitly hoisted and lowered long-pole oars and, with a twirl, the *Gaberdine*, the barge's name, parted from the sand by the quay and tacked out towards the roadsteads and the German Sea.

It was Elspeth's first real voyage, her first sight of the wide, wide sea. It took her breath away. Like the cattle on the step below she was amazed by it and stood transfixed, gripping the rail post tightly, drinking in the scene and feeling the slap of the sea-wind upon her cheeks and the tousle of it in her hair. She did not, at first, look at all to the land. The long horizon held her in thrall. She could envisage the rim of the earth, its mountains of blue ice and salt-white snow. It seemed far and yet, from the deck of the *Gaberdine*, attainably near. She noticed how the cattle rolled their eyes to that infinity and save for a shake of the head or a stamp of the hoof now and then were soothed by the sight and made still.

Ships stood out against the haze, listless in the bay, quick against the skyline. Brigantines and schooners, Elspeth assumed, laden with rice and cotton, sugar and tobacco and other exotic cargoes which were a thousand miles removed from coal and fish and cattle and mundane coastal loads. The barge seemed tiny on the estuary amid flocks of tall ships, cutters and smacks. As the Lothian coast came near she could read the names of trader ships moored to anchors in wait for the tide – *Daedalus*, *Fox*, *Arcturus*, *Culloden*, the *Isabella Jaynes*. How fine it would be to have a schooner painted with your name, Elspeth thought, to have your name sailed to the tropics and the poles.

Moving like a monkey Deadlie McEwan hoisted his way round the gunwales, avoiding the sails, and gave her a hail.

"Is it no' a grand sight, lassie?"

"Aye, sir, it is."

"I've never been south o' St Ebba's head or north o' Kirkcaldy but for a' that I've seen the Americas an' the Indies inside my head. Aye, when I was sober too."

Elspeth laughed. She did not resent it when Deadlie put an arm about her shoulders and held her for a moment or two as the old barge swung again and tacked towards the town.

"What does a colliery lass seek in Leith?" said Deadlie.

"How can you tell I'm a collier?"

"I can tell all the trades." Deadlie tapped his nose with his forefinger. "Every job o' work leaves its mark. But you're o'er bonnie t' have been at the diggin' for long. Is it a husband you'll be meetin' at the pier?"

Curiosity was the bargeman's vice. He would trawl for gossip as others of his kin trawled for cod. She would be his day's best catch.

Elspeth said, "No husband. I'm going to the Babylon."

If Deadlie McEwan thought he had heard everything, he was wrong; her answer caught him by surprise. "The Babylon! My, my, lassie! I wouldna have put you down as one o' that sort."

"I'm told men without work congregate there."

"So they do, so they do. But it's a damned ill place for a visit. Have ye no work then?"

"I have work. I have need to employ a coal-cutter."

"Ach, aye." Deadlie nodded. "Kilt, was he?"

"A month since."

"How many mouths?"

"Four, an' my own."

"Well, there's coal men there too, I suppose. God, but there's a' sorts in the Babylon. Mostly sailors an' ships' tradesmen but a' sorts, a' sorts."

"Where is the Babylon?"

Deadlie glanced to the shore. The shapes of the houses were made indistinct by traffic along the harbour and quays but the skyline was clear, church spires and turrets, the cones of the glasshouses, crow-stepped roofs and the chimney towers of tenements.

He pointed. "See yonder under the shape o' Arthur's Seat, the tall steeple? Yon's out towards the Coalhill an' the Brigend. Between Constitution Street an' the steeple lie the Yardheads. The Babylon creeps awa' from its nether end. You'll find your way in wi'out difficulty, lass. I pray ye can find your way out again."

As they closed on the harbour Elspeth lost the company of the friendly skipper of the cattle-barge for he was required to pilot the vessel, yapping commands to his young crew, dancing hither and thither among the drovers, while the cattle, scenting the hot, heavy odours of the docks, became restless and thrawn once more and had to be held down by the horns by the herders or tethered tight by muzzle ropes.

Rafts of Baltic timber heaved on the swell. Even at this hour of an afternoon lighters were loading by the quays of the old stone harbour and, Elspeth noticed, the only part of the range of the shore that seemed quiet was the distant dump of the Coalhill for warm weather had killed the domestic trade. Smudged by the haze the façades of the town – cottages, kirks, warehouses, tenements and taverns – looked dusty and precarious, like roan-bound volumes leaning on a shelf. She felt a stab of apprehension at the thought of what had brought her here, the search for a man, a fit, trustworthy man. Even so, after a week living in fear that Georgie Haynes would return in search of revenge, fear of what he might do to Sarah and Davy if he caught them alone, Elspeth had taken the only course of action open to her. She had come to Leith to track down a collier, any decent chap who was willing to tackle the deep seams of the Abbeyfield and scour out the coal-heavy cave. When she stepped on to the stones of Leith, however, her pessimism increased. She saw how silly she had been in contemplating such an undertaking. What man would be mad enough to saddle himself with three young girls, an ailing boy and a woman with hardly a penny to her name? She almost urned and stepped back on to the deck of the *Gaberdine*. But he sheep were being driven off and cattle would be on their heels and not even the jovial McEwan had a second to spare o encourage her, or offer a wave of farewell.

She drifted back, turned and looked along the curve of the arbour to the tall, tall steeple that Deadlie had given her as landmark and, squaring her shoulders, set out to find the tand of raddled tenements known by repute as the Babylon.

t was not the height of summer yet – country folk considered August to be the real summer month – but for June it was lorious and hot with grain growing lush in Lachlan's new-illed patches and the clover lays thick as wool.

The cattle were down by the river, lying in the shade of the willow trees, flicking their tails and ears and lowing, in a moony kind of way, as if summoning Sandy to come down and crub their itching hides and swat away the black flies with a wicker whisk. Sandy, though, had gone to Fintry with his ather to purchase bolts of burlap to be stitched into sacks. Cat was out in the garden with Edith, the children and Mistress Alicia, lolling about under an awning improvised from old arpeting and drinking barley water from a stone jug. Robert ad deigned to take a nap in his grandmother's bed, while Aileen kept cool in the cubby by polishing a dented old brass warming-pan that Lachlan had unearthed from a cellar.

It was the sort of opportunity that Anna had been waiting or. She slipped along the corridor and ascended the narrow piral staircase that would take her to the Bontines' quarters. s usual Mr Gibbie was off on business. The library was eserted. It was seldom other than deserted. There were no cholars in Strachan. The windows of the old room were slack nd admitted draughts and the chimney smoked and the woodwork, even the leaded glass cases which held 'the library', ad an odour of gall that made no appeal to anyone in the ousehold.

Anna had been considerably upset by her visit to Robert

Rudge's house. She had behaved with admirable coolness at the time but it bothered her that she had failed to tempt such a notorious old rake as Robert Rudge, that he had been able to resist her. Why had he insisted on chastity before marriage? Marriage was the weirdest turn of all. It amazed Anna that Robert Rudge had ventured a proposal and, as the days went past, her astonishment and her bewilderment increased instead of diminishing.

It was high time, Anna had decided, that she armed herself with knowledge. Taking a page, as it were, from Elspeth's book, she would seek free advice from the volumes in Mr Gibbie's library.

Stealthily Anna opened one of the cases. Grey dust lay thick within. The glass itself was greasy and unpleasant to touch. The books too had a damp, nasty feel to them and the binding left traces on the fingertips, like rust or dried blood. Anna wrinkled her nose and, peering, scanned the labels on the spines.

Sermons of Rev. James Black – Heaven and Hell – Instruction for the Ignorant.

She began to doubt that Mr Gibbie had bought the books at all. They were all about kirk matters, the strain of religion that demanded that you sell your soul to God from the moment you were born with all love and merriment traded away in tears and lamentation for the hope of a better world to come. In spite of the warmth of the afternoon air Anna shivered involuntarily, closed that section of the long case and opened another. It contained more of the same material.

To show her nonchalance Anna picked one at random, opened it and read: "*Therefore the Lord reaping the Manifestation of His Grace on the Elect and Gospel Wrath and Vengeance on Reprobates*—" Anna closed the book with a snap and hastily slotted it back into place.

She glimpsed her face in the bottle-glass pane, seemed to see the face of Robert Rudge by it, a trick of sunlight in the whorls. She wondered who, if not he, was damned; if she was damned with him. She shivered again, closed that case too and continued bravely with her search, trying to concentrate on finding what she came for and making away with it to a safer, less sepulchral place.

The book looked small and unthreatening. It lay on top of seven or eight great learned slabs in a sleek grey cloth. Yellowing labels indicated that they contained the Law. *The Pocket Lawyer*, however, was a lightweight thing and, as advertised, slipped into Anna's frock pocket very neatly.

She escaped down to the servants' hall and out into the yard, sought privacy in the musty hay loft above the stables. Sunlight streamed through the half-door and illuminated the motes and particles that drifted in the hot summer air. Cushioned on hay, Anna unbuttoned her bodice and sleeves, hitched up her skirt, kicked off her shoes then settled back and opened the little volume.

"Law," Anna read, "having thus for its object the constant and perpetual will to give every one his own, teaches us to cultivate this will by living honestly, injuring no one and giving every one his own." She nodded approval, read on: "Such is law according to the authorities, but law is not accustomed to figure on such lofty ground as this; for man is by nature the absolute master of his own will and the sort of will of which it is in general his pleasure is not that constant and perpetual will to give every man his own but rather a constant and perpetual will to the contrary – that is, to keep all that he can for himself."

Not unaware of irony, Anna gave a dry chuckle and flicked over the pages of introductory matter.

Diligence: Master and Servant: Sequestration. There it was – *Marriage and Dissolution by Divorce.*

She sank a little deeper into the hay and crossed her knees. In two or three minutes she would know all that she needed to know without paying a lawyer a penny. She felt herself no end clever.

Forefinger tracing the words Anna read of Divorce and its two particular grounds – Adultery and Wilful Desertion. She skipped through the paragraphs on adultery – for they made her slightly uneasy – and focused her attention on desertion.

There was little enough, nothing that she could not understand except some sentences about an oath of calumny and inheritance of property. Matt had left nothing of value. He had fled suddenly, Revenue Officers baying at his heels and a price on his head.

It seemed very simple as set down in the passage: "Divorce on ground of wilful desertion may be obtained after a desertion of four years, but not by collusion between the spouses."

She was not quite sure what 'collusion' meant. She was, however, certain that it did not apply to her and would be no bar to obtaining her will of the law. In fifteen months' time she would be free to marry again, to take as husband Robert Rudge or anyone else who caught her fancy and might bring her advantage.

Anna turned the page. She found no more on divorce to interest her. She sighed. She lay back, eyes open, and contemplated the atoms that hung in the still, blonde air. She gave a smug little snort; the law was not as she had supposed it to be, craggy and incomprehensible. Clearly, she might exercise her will through it and be divorced and remarried before next season's harvest was in the barn. Matt had deserted her. He would not dare return to stake a husband's claim on her again.

Anna dreamed for a bit, dreamed of Robert Rudge, who might prove an ideal suitor now she had grown used to the notion. She dreamed of Randall Bontine, whose selfishness rankled. She dreamed, almost unwittingly, of Sandy Sinclair who had been tucked away in a corner of her calculating mind and in a small soft corner of her heart this last five or six months, and who would be easy to take if ever she felt impelled to settle for love alone.

Against the slope of her knee the pages of *The Pocket Lawyer* turned under their own weight. Idly Anna glanced down at them.

Marriage.

Marriage, indeed! It was all she had to offer now, her person, her body. She must not be tempted into a valueless trade as she had been before. There was no mam now to rule her, to try to turn her into something old-fashioned. She, Anna, saw the world as it was, the real world in all its nakedness. It did not frighten her one bit.

Her eyes traced the columns of print: "Marriage is the society formed by a man and a woman when they agree to take each other, and live together as man and wife, during their joint lives." Not a word there about love. She read on. "Who may marry."

And then she sat up, fingers gripping the binding of the book, legs shooting out, spine straightening.

"What?" she said aloud. "What?"

Exceptions.

It was there under exceptions, as clear and unequivocal as the laws governing divorce. *"For instance, a man may not marry the sister of his deceased wife, nor a widow the brother of her husband."*

Anna's mouth shaped the words as she read them aloud, read them again and again.

She had known, of course, in a vague sort of way that Sandy could not marry her while Matt was alive. But she had somehow assumed that Matt would eventually be taken for dead, that once she was free of him he would pass off into a clouded land and that if she chose Sandy she might have him, might persuade folk to call her widow, to give her all her own way.

In her ignorance she had flirted with Sandy to no avail. She had teased and tempted him, made him fall in love with her in ignorance of the fact that he might never have her.

Widow, not wife, said *The Pocket Lawyer*, though Matt were to fall dead on the doorstep of Strachan Castle, though officers of the court were to have his body presented for viewing, it still could not be. She could not marry. The law forbade it. The law was not made for poor folk after all but for men and women who had property. They were the governors and guardians of the law. Nobody could sway them, not in the name of love or need or anything.

Scrambling to her feet Anna raised her hand to throw the book out of the half-door into the yard. Only sense stayed her. She closed the volume and pressed it against her breast. She must keep it hidden away, keep it secretly, covetously, as if it was a book of amorous stories and not the story of how the rich ruled the poor. She looked down from the loft and saw, in the sunlight, Sandy's field-blouse hanging on a nail on the door of the byre. She felt a sudden strong pang within her at the thought of the fair-haired young man and how he loved her and wanted her and how she – now and suddenly – loved him desperately in return.

* * *

Mongrels roamed sniffing about the gates of the meat-mulchers' yard and scraggy cats perched on top of the board fence that protected the place from human scavengers. A pack of small boys milled about the lane's end. A ragged girl-child, trapped in a fish barrel, had become their victim. In spite of her screams of woe, she seemed to make no effort to escape the role that linked her with her peers.

If the smells of Leith were strong by the harbour and quays at least they had freshness and variety. Here, away from the sea-walls in the hinterland of the port, the air was stale and thick. Smell became stench and, by the dripping spouts of the tenement drains, caught at the lining of Elspeth's throat and made her want to retch. She had been in squalid streets before and was no exquisite lady without experience of poverty. Even so, the narrow straggling lane of pitted cottages and four-storey tenements, the infamous Babylon, daunted and disgusted her more than she could have imagined.

She was sorry that she had eaten. The sea trip had given her an appetite, however, and she had purchased a cog of boiled cod and a tankard of small beer from a stall on the Shore. She had felt better for refreshment, encouraged in a quest that had begun to seem not only hazardous but foolish.

Leith folk seemed so content, so engaged in affairs of the port that Elspeth could not believe that there were men here without occupation. Even the sailors appeared to have a purpose that gave the lie to all she had heard about Leith as a source of labour. She had no lighter in need of a pilot, no brig to fit, not even a creel of herring to be salted or a board of crabs to be boiled. She did not belong in the thriving tarry town and doubted if she would find a pitman here, not even by the Coalhill piers where men were paid by the load and would not leave that site of employment even when the June sun dried up the trade and brought them hand-to-mouth.

She had eaten her supper at a bench outside a tavern and had stared at the traffic of the Shore and kept an eye on the steeple that Deadlie McEwan had given her as a landmark, as if she was afraid that it would grow legs and swagger away and be lost in the crowd too. After she had finished her beer, wiped her mouth and tidied her hair she went along towards he steeple and found the route to the old Brigend and swung eft away from the quays. When she came to the meat-ulchers' yard she knew that she was near her destination. he did not have to ask the boys to point out the Babylon. It vas here, all here, occupying the length of the short street, a ane really, which jutted into a vertical of dusty sunlight that ose like a plinth from a mound of dry dirt.

She pressed her hand to her nostrils and, keeping to the utter in the centre of the street, walked between lowerng tenements and crouched decaying cottages. She kept her ead down for fear that she would somehow give offence o the blowsy women who hung from the open windows or o the men that moped about the close-mouths and wynds. Vherever might be her place Elspeth knew that it was not the abylon. She vowed to continue, vowed also that she would ot linger one moment longer than was necessary to justify ne trip and to satisfy herself that no man who dwelled in this ough would be ready and willing to earn his price in a decent amily.

"Ahoy, dearie. Lookin' for a crib, are ye?" Elspeth ignored ne question. She darted a glance anxiously at the figure n the window, a grey-haired woman in a filthy shift open at ne neck to display her mottled breasts. "I'll fin' ye a cot, weetheart. Free lodgin' for a fresh wee smoot like you."

Elspeth was almost tempted to make a polite refusal but ept her lips squeezed shut. She knew exactly what the offer nplied.

"Cam' awa' in here, hen." The woman who addressed her raned from a ground-level window, reached out a hand as if o catch her arm as well as her attention. She was young, with reasy black hair and sharp black eyes that seemed to pierce nd prick at Elspeth like fish-hooks. "Ne'er heed yon fat trull. 'll gi'e ye wark a-plenty. I get a' the bonny sailor laddies omin' ben ma hoose."

The language itself was alien, not guttural but slurred in a ay that made it sound sinister and depraved.

Elspeth walked faster. She had found the Babylon but she id not know what to do now. Where were the labourers, the nemployed hands that might listen to her proposal? She eeped apprehensively at a group of males ahead of her. Five or six of them lounged about a barrel, puffing on clays and swigging from a glass bottle. They were not old and yet they were burned out, scraped raw by indulgence and idleness.

One was tall, lily-skinned and wore the canvases of a carpenter. He held out the bottle to her. "Ha'e a wee nip, ma love."

"Aye," said a pot-bellied dwarf with a soiled wool cap dragged down over one eye. "Nip for a nip, eh-heh?"

A third fellow, stimulated by seeing a stranger in the unlovely street, stepped forward, not to accost her, but to show off his skill as a dancer. He hopped and kicked his bare brown feet for three or four seconds and then, exhausted and coughing, fell back against his companions who simply let him slide down to the paving as if he belonged on his back and not on his feet.

Elspeth glanced back at the group. They did not pursue her. She had left the women behind too. She had come to a section of the street where three or four hoardings gave a false impression of rising respectability.

Tenements tottered to the skyline, closing off the evening light. A peeling board caught her attention. She paused. She had a faint recollection of Thomas Rance mentioning the place. What had Mr Rance said? Heat, smells and tensions dulled her wits. Only thoughts of the family, of the threat of Georgie Haynes, of the impossibility of sustaining herself as a harness wife for long drove her on now.

THE BABYLON – BEDS FOR SAILORS – ALES & WINES

This was the lodging-house. Here casual labour was sure to be found, workers who did not have a bill to post in a craft house or a trade meeting-place.

At least no harlots flaunted themselves in the grimy windows and no loungers, stewed on bad whisky, hung about the door. The door itself was of unvarnished wood and stood an inch ajar. Beyond it was darkness, silence, and an odour of burnt potatoes.

Elspeth glanced down the street. The men by the barrel had lost interest in her and were throwing the legless dancer about between them as if he was a hobby-horse. She squared herself and pushed upon the door which swung reluctantly before her with a choked creak. She stepped over the worn step and went nside.

It was not Heaven's heartland. It was not, by the lights of Balnesmoor, say, 'respectable'. For all that, it was not a crib-shop nor a drinking-den. The dark woodwork of the hall ed into a plain dark-wood corridor with several doors set into he panelling. At one time, long, long ago, perhaps it had been mansion for a sea-captain, a comfortable dwelling filled with welcomes. There was no dirt, no litter in the hall, only a film f dust on everything as if it had been weeks or months since nybody had passed in or out of the portals.

Another board, a slate with whitewashed letters, was cocked on a horse nail by the corridor's end.

STAIRS – COME DOWN

At first Elspeth could not see the top of the stairs. They were ucked into a pitch-dark corner, flush with the wall almost, narow as a gangplank and very steep. There was a corner on them oo. It was not until she turned it that she found any sign of life. Light, and the strong odour of charred potatoes, drew her down on to the floor of the cellar where, she saw at once, the residents f The Babylon had hidden themselves away.

There were women in the broad room as well as men, two r three young children bundled in rags and at least one infant, which she could hear puling but could not separate from the hadows. The cellar was vaulted with brick pillars, and a huge earth like a cave occupied the faraway wall. Though there ad been no rain for days shirts and hose were hung on sagging opes about it. In the hearth, amid a collection of blackened ots and pans, smoke reeked from a pile of dross and driftwood. Kneeling there was a tiny man with a coppery complexion nd a brass earring in his ear. He wore baggy cotton trousers nd a sleeveless vest the colour of seaweed. He was stirring a ot with a wooden spoon and, turning, saw Elspeth and winked t her. From what tropical country he came Elspeth had no otion but when he grinned she saw that his teeth had been led to points as sharp as needles, saw too the long purple cars that marred – or decorated – each cheek.

“Mem,” he said. “Mem a ted?”

She did not understand his question but when he lifted the ripping spurtle from the soup, held it to his mouth and waggled his tongue, Elspeth caught the gist of the invitation and, forcing a smile, shook her head.

"Mem ate?"

"No," Elspeth said. "I've had my supper, thank you."

In the rear portion of the room were two tables. A family occupied one of them, a man, woman and three young children. They were not taking supper, however, but used the table's surface to sort out pins. A mass of the cheap metal things littered a green cloth arranged for insertion into little mushrooms of cloth spread over twists of straw which were tied with strands of red wool. The children made the mushrooms, dexterous and fast, concentrating so thoroughly upon their work that they did not even notice Elspeth. With wetted fingers the woman dabbed up a bristle of the pins, pressed a dozen or so into each of the holders and, with a stretch of her arm, pushed it towards the man who transferred it as carefully as if it was a bubble of spun glass into a fish creel by his feet.

Opposite the industrious pin-sellers, his back to Elspeth, a scarred, blond-haired man, with a matted beard, was slumped over the table. A bottle was before him – whisky – and a tiny thimble-shaped vessel of silvery metal which he filled and flicked to his mouth. He put the vessel down, contemplated it, refilled it and tossed the contents into his mouth once more. He was strong-shouldered and wore trousers that had once been oiled, a shirt of heavy canvas material that, for coolness, he had loosed about his waist and chest.

He ignored Elspeth. Eight or ten men in the room regarded her from listless positions with only passing interest and no visible spark of curiosity. She did not know what to do. Something told her that it would be imprudent to announce to all and sundry that she could offer one man employment and a wage. What quality of man, what sort of grotesque, would put himself forward? How could she refuse him without giving offence? In the cellar of The Babylon there was no feeling of resentment or of angry frustration. Despair, a lowness of spirit, was the mood that Elspeth experienced. She advanced towards the pin-sellers only because they showed evidence of energy and industry.

The man looked up at her approach. His cheeks were stubbled, his complexion pale as fungus. The woman, not much older than Elspeth, was puffy, not fat. She had a pitted rash about her mouth and swollen knuckles. Tiny work, it seemed, told on the body too, took its toll as much as hauling or strapping and brought in less to spend on nourishment. The children had the build of whittle sticks; all girls, all younger than Sarah Bennet. The work did not cease when Elspeth approached. Only the man and the oldest girl even turned their eyes to her.

Elspeth said, "Who's the – the keeper of The Babylon?"

"He's ga'ed out," said the man.

"When will he be back?"

The man took a mushroom from his wife and laid it on to he others in the creel. Tomorrow they would tour the streets of Leith or Edinburgh and offer the little pin-rolls at a halfpenny each. How much could be made by such miniature rade? Precious little, Elspeth realised.

The man said, "When it's time."

Without looking up the woman said, "Are ye seekin' odgin'?"

"No," said Elspeth. "I – I have need for a workman."

She spoke without emphasis, almost a whisper. Even so, in he main chamber three or four lethargic heads lifted.

At the table opposite the pin-sellers, the fair-haired sailor gave a sigh, slid out his arms and laid his face between hem as if the very hint of employment wearied him beyond endurance.

"What kind o' work?" said the man.

"Will ye have need o' family work?" said the woman.

"Only a man, for – for coal diggin'."

"Nah, nah." The man shook his head and popped another pin-cushion into the basket by his leg. "Nah, nah, nah."

"It pays good silver," said Elspeth.

"Not all the siller in a duke's coffers wad get me down yonder," the man said. "Nah, nah."

"Do ye know of anybody here—"

"They'll be in late."

"How many?" said Elspeth.

"Thirty or forty," said the woman. "It's cheap here. There's no drink sold on the premises, though some can find it. It's a amily lodgin'. Clean enough, if chill in winter."

"How long have you been here?"

"These three year," the man answered.

Elspeth said, "Do ye think I'll find a coal-digger among the others?"

The man and woman shrugged in unison.

Elspeth seated herself on the end of the bench out of the way of that rhythmic industry. She noticed that the girls' fingers, pricked by the pins, were speckled with tiny gnat-bites of blood. When some seamstress, secure in her post, plucked a pin from the cushion and saw the tip of it stained with blood, would she think of how it had got there, and feel herself sustained by the thought of those scaled beneath her, those who must bleed, as well as sweat, for their porridge?

The airless cellar had affected Elspeth already. She felt weary, bleary with lack of light and sifting smoke from the fire. Since the pin-sellers did not object, she put an elbow on the table and rested her head on her hand. It was hopeless. Tomorrow she would return to Placket and its mess of problems, to Davy and Mouse and the threat of retaliation from the keelman, to grinding days in the black dust, dragging wagons to the shaft. But at the end of it there was money and here in the heart of the Babylon she could almost believe that it was worth it just to have a place and a penny in her pocket.

Tonight, though, she would buy a bed here. She had slept in worse places during her days on the road.

"What's the price of a night's lodging?" Elspeth asked.

"Down here on the straw it's one penny. Upstairs wi' a blanket it's three pence," the woman replied. "But you're no' the sort t' tarry long in the Babylon."

"No," said Elspeth. "I'll be goin' home tomorrow."

"Home." The woman shook her head wistfully. "What's your name, lass?"

"Elspeth Patterson."

She heard a grunt. She swung round and saw that the sailor had come round. He thrust himself up on his elbows and raised his head, stared at her out of icy blue eyes, wide with shock. His hair, as tangled as his beard, veiled half his face.

"'Pet?" He spoke in a hoarse whisper. "God an' Jesus! Is it yoursel', 'Pet?"

Knocking away the stool behind him, he shot to his feet, swayed and then, with a gesture that she remembered of old, swept the hair from his brow with the back of his hand.

"Do ye not know me, 'Pet?" he whispered.

"No, I—"

"It's Matt. Your brother-in-law, Matt Sinclair."

Perhaps it was the ale that he had consumed in the yard of the inn at Fintry after the buying of the buckram was done that had restored to Lachlan Sinclair some vestige of uprightness. He was not used to strong drink. Only the heat of the day and the fact that he had sweated heavily had persuaded him to indulge. He was far from drunk, however, and sat up very straight on the board of the cart with the reins firmly in his hands. He had rebuffed Sandy's offer to drive. He had taken charge of Maisie with much of his old authority.

Sandy was both amused and puzzled by his father's stiff attitude but he was no longer a boy who could be awed by it. He had grown into his own man and, while he would obey his father, he would not back down from a quarrel if he thought the old chap was wrong.

There was no quarrel in the air, however. Maisie jogged the light-loaded cart along, heading by a string road for the bridge at Honeywell which would carry them over the Endrick and west to the Lightwater.

It was as fine a day as there had been that summer, blue and hot, with the broom bright yellow on the banks. Sandy had drunk his share of Wilson's brew but he was younger and more used to it and it did no more than refresh him. He felt fine and easy as he swayed on the board by his father's side. It did not occur to him that it was aught else but the ale that had stiffened Lachlan so.

They were half-way home to Strachan before Lachlan cleared his throat – and cleared it again. Sandy hardly noticed. He put it down to the dust that Maisie's hoofs kicked up now that the ruts had finally dried out. Sandy leaned elbows on knees, gently swaying.

Lachlan Sinclair cleared his throat once more.

"Son." He began in the sort of tone that he had once reserved for reading Scripture in the kirk. "Son, it has not escaped my attention that you're attracted to your sister-in-law."

Sandy squinted in surprise at his father who was watching the mare's ears flick and tail whisk.

"Anna! She's—" Sandy could not find words.

"She's the legal wife of your brother."

"I know that fine."

"I'll confess that she's bonnie."

"She's all that," Sandy agreed.

"But she can never be right for you."

"I'm no' daft, Father. I know the law."

"Until her dyin' day – may that be far hence – Anna Cochran will be forbid t'you, son."

"Aye, aye." Sandy tried to make light of it.

He had known all along that marriage with Anna was impossible. Alive or dead Matt had full claim on her. The odd thing was that he could not stop wanting her, not just to bed with her but to make her his own. Yet he bridled at his father's tone, resented the fact that his father was forcing him to admit the futility of being in love with Anna.

"Do not dismiss my advice," said Lachlan sternly.

"Even if it was possible," said Sandy, "do ye think for a minute Anna'd have the likes o' me for a husband?"

"I'm sure she would."

Sandy darted a glance at his father but the man stared at the leafy hedges and sweep of the fields.

"Has she – has she told ye as much?"

"Sandy," his father warned.

Sandy nodded. "It's hard, Daddy, wi' her livin' so close."

"Resist her," said Lachlan Sinclair. "Resist wi' all your might. I've had enough with Matt, with the trouble he brought to us. I could not stand by to see you ruin yourself o'er the same girl."

Resentment came again in Sandy. Could his father not see that he would do nothing dishonourable, that he had resisted so far and would resist into infinity? He might be drawn to Anna but he was not blind to the dangers of loving her. There was too much of the grieve in him, too much of his father's moral dignity, for him to take her against her will. It was love not loving that he wanted from Anna Cochran.

"It matters not a toss," said Sandy, with a sigh. "Anna's still yearnin' for Randall Bontine."

"The laird's had his fling with her, Sandy. She was a fool to be taken by him, but it was understandable."

"Understandable?"

"She was flattered by the laird's attentions. I canna hold it against her, try though I might."

"Aye, but what about Sir Randall? Surely it was wicked o' him to take her when she was married t'your son?"

"Anna – Anna is—" Lachlan Sinclair could not confess that he too had felt the attraction of the dark-haired girl. He had made his defence of the laird of Ottershaw, of the whole Bontine tradition. He trusted his son not to push him too far lest the edifice on which he had constructed his existence slumped still further. "Anna is – Anna."

"Matt's wife," said Sandy.

"It's time that Anna thought of releasin' him."

"That's a queer way o' puttin' it," said Sandy, "since it's our Matt who did the desertin'."

"High time she married," said Lachlan Sinclair. "Aye, and you too, Sandy."

"I've no mind to marry."

"You need to marry. You're of an age to marry."

"Father, I'm barely twenty."

"There's Edith."

"Edith?" said Sandy. "God in Heaven!"

"She'd make ye a good obedient wife."

"An' would continue to serve the Bontines, I suppose?"

"Your mother an' I will not live for ever," said Lachlan. "If Edith's not to your likin', take one of Davidson's daughters. Fine girls they are, always with a laugh on their lips."

"I'm not denyin' it," said Sandy. "But I hardly know them."

"Come now, you're no shy laddie. You've been boastin' to me, not a minute since, that—"

Sandy interrupted. "Leave the findin' o' a wife to me, if you please."

"Put Anna Cochran out of your mind, Sandy, that's all I ask."

"Aye, aye," said Sandy, angry now.

"Swear to me."

"I told you I wouldn't—"

"Swear."

"Very well," said Sandy truculently. "I swear."

Physically Matt was so much changed that he seemed like a stranger; yet the questions that tumbled from his lips carried Elspeth back to that dreadful time when she too had been faced with decisions, to the night when she had found incontrovertible proof that James was her father. Matt, of course, had no knowledge of that discovery. For Matt the life of the good folk of Ottershaw and Balnesmoor had become frozen at the night he had ridden off on Sabre, Randall Bontine's stallion, to escape the officers of the law and evade a hangman's noose.

"I told the truth, 'Pet. I never killed yon mannie. Well, I did, I suppose, but it was not done in cold blood. He killed the shopkeepers an' was lurkin' in the store to do me harm."

"I believe you, Matt."

"What of the others? Do they believe me?"

"I canna say. I left Balnesmoor only days after you."

"Because o' me?"

"Because of what you told me about my – my husband."

"He had it done. Moodie ordered the murder."

"Yes," said Elspeth. "I think it's true. He did."

"Can I go back?"

"How can you? I doubt if there's proof that another hand fired the shop at Kennart or that you killed only to defend yourself. Proof will always lie against you, Matt."

Matt had embraced her across the table, much to the astonishment of the pin-seller's family; then he had drawn her away to the privacy of a small table in an alcove. Furtive and possessive, he had trapped her there with questions and with talk of his 'adventures' while the poor residents of the Babylon trailed in from their pursuit of employment and set about preparing a pick of fish or dish of gruel, gathered about the smoking fire.

"Tell me, have you heard from Anna?"

"Matt, I've heard from nobody. I know no more of the village than you do."

"Is she still wi' Randall Bontine?"

"I just do not know."

"How did ye find out I was here?"

"I didn't. It was chance; a wild coincidence."

"Did ye not come for me?"

"No, Matt. How could I possibly know where you were?"

"Aye." He nodded. "If Anna found out I was here she'd spiff me to the King's officers. It was my fault, though. I never loved her enough. I wanted money. I wanted money t' spend on her, to woo her away from Bontine."

Elspeth let him talk. He had not asked obvious questions, had not sought to find out what purpose had really brought her here or where she lived or what she did or how her daughter thrived. For the time being, Matt was his selfish old in-centred self; yet he was changed too. The arrogance had gone. Uncertainty was manifest in his quick nervous movements and the tension with which he clung, now and then, to Elspeth's hand as if he feared that she was a figment of some drunken dream and would vanish if he did not hold her to him. Not for the first time Elspeth found that she pitied Matt Sinclair more than she despised him.

He poured out a thimble of whisky and tipped it into his mouth. "Christ, do ye know, I *had* money. I earned a walletful o' money on the whalers. Two voyages I made, each one successful."

"Whalers?" said Elspeth. "Is that where you went, to sea?"

"One week after I horsed out o' the Lennox I was stuck in this port. I'd no notion o' what to do wi' myself. I harboured a daft idea I might find passage on a ship to the Americas. Then an agent approached me. I thought he was a bloody sheriff at first but he was just an agent for a whaling line, crewin' for a voyage."

"In winter?" said Elspeth.

"Nah, nah," said Matt. "He wanted a crew signed before the spring. He had a square-rigger set up for a whale-oil run."

"I've not heard o' a 'whale-oil run', Matt."

"A man named McNeil owns three whalers here in Leith. He owns the blubber works too. When the catch is returned and the blubber rendered down, he ships it o'er to the Low Countries an' into parts o' France, even Spain. Whale-ships carry the cargo through the heavy winter seas. They have double hulls, strengthened against the ice, y'see, an' furnish oil at a time when the sea trade's low. Sound business, 'Pet."

"But you aren't a sailor."

"I learned right quick on the cargo voyages," said Matt. "I was better than a green hand by the time we returned t' Leith. While the *Argo* was fittin' for the whaling season we were paid a small daily fee on the promise we'd not sign on wi' somebody else. The ship was all crewed, y' see, an' ready for a sprint t' the whalin' grounds the instant the weather cleared. It was a race t' reach the Arctic regions before the boats from Whitby or Hull. Mr McNeil's captains are always fast away."

Matt talked on and on as if he had bottled up the story of his travels and the privations he had suffered for months, with no sympathetic ear to listen to it. Elspeth listened in fascination while Matt told her how the cold ate into the body so that your heart and lungs seemed made of ice. He spoke of foul, weevil-ridden food and the cramped, heaving confines of the fo'c'sle, of climbing the shrouds in sheets of icy rain, of rowing a whale boat after great leviathans of the deep day after day until your hands bled and your spine was bent like a sheepshank. He did not make the whaling seem glamorous or brag of his achievements. The gambler in Matt had been reduced by hardships that the sailor born takes for granted. Money had not compensated for suffering. The son of the grieve of Ottershaw found that he could not bring himself to sign for a third voyage.

Matt stroked his beard. "Scurvy, sailors call it," he said. "I thought I was like t' die of it. Frost hides Greenland. Frost so sharp it strips the flesh off your bones. See." He offered his cheek as if for a kiss. "Without hair on my face I'm a sight t' make dogs bark an' bairns cry out." He grinned. "It's a fine disguise for an outlaw, is it not?"

"I – I would not have known you, Matt."

"I call m'self Shearer now. Matthew Shearer. I signed that name on my articles. I've grown used to it. I made up stories about where I came from, about my family. From Ayrshire, I say I am."

Outlaws; they were both outlaws, Elspeth realised. She was also in hiding, not from officers of the Crown but from her husband. They talked on. Matt paused now and then to listen to his sister-in-law or to sup the whisky which, he claimed, had been bought with the last of his savings.

"I live here," he said at length. "Here in this hole wi' strangers."

"Have you no friends, Matt?"

"Only companions in starvation," Matt answered. "I scrounge a day's work here an' there down at the coal dumps, scooping dross."

"Coal, perhaps, that I dug out o' the Abbeyfield."

"It could be so," said Matt. "Is money t' be made in the diggin'?"

"Fair money."

"Have you money in your purse now, 'Pet?"

"I have some, aye."

"We should celebrate our reunion in a more comfortable establishment than the Babylon," said Matt. "I know an inn by the Shore that has good beds."

"Matt, I'm here for a special purpose."

Matt blinked. It had not yet occurred to him that Elspeth had not deliberately followed his tracks.

"What purpose could you have in this hole?"

"I'm seekin' a man t' dig for us," Elspeth explained. "I was told I might find one here."

"So you might." Matt cocked his head and squinted at her. "How does a hewer get paid?"

"By the quantity o' coal he digs out."

"No truck?"

"Cash in his hand on the Abbeyfield."

"Cash in hand, eh! Must be a rare sort o' place."

"Jock Bennet, the hewer I worked for, was killed by a fall in the seam. Since then his girls an' I have not been able to earn what we're worth as daughters to a hewer."

"I'll dig for ye," said Matt without hesitation.

"I'm not sure it's for you, Matt."

"Am I not handsome enough for ye, 'Pet?"

"It's not that. Deep seam work needs skill."

"I can learn."

It was not Matt's ability to learn that made Elspeth hesitate. She did not doubt that he had strength and she had no more than a passing qualm about his influence upon the Bennets. Matt was no longer a boy. Much of his stubborn temper had been wrung out of him. But he was big, perhaps too big for the cramping spaces of a base-level seam. He had not been reared in narrow places, might not be able to endure them.

"I'm not afeared o' tight places, Elspeth, if that's what you're thinkin'," he said. "I can learn quick how t' cut coal off a wall. It canna be that difficult. God, if I can learn how to clamber up shrouds in a snowstorm an' tie a knot wi' my teeth, I can learn how t' lie on my belly an' put a nail into a coal seam."

"What plans had you made on your own account, Matt?"

"Plans?" He laughed and shook his head. "I had plans t' finish this bottle, eat a cog o' stew then doss in the straw till tomorrow."

"And tomorrow?"

Once more he shook his head, spread his hands, shrugged.

"Another day," Matt said. "Just like t'day."

Elspeth glanced over her shoulder.

The cellar had filled now for evening had laid melancholy shadows over the streets of Leith. The weary and irresolute felt the coming of night as keenly as any shepherd with a croft light winking in the vale or a ploughman with chimney smoke to guide him past the day's last furrow. Perhaps the folk of the Babylon felt it even more; they congregated meekly, making no great chatter or clatter of noise, going about their chores with charitable regard for their neighbours, bundled cheek by jowl into this house for the homeless.

Matt might have changed his name and his appearance, but he was still kin to the community of Balnesmoor. Elspeth felt obligated to rescue him from the company of these apathetic strangers.

She said, "We're paid only what we earn, Matt."

"You haul the coal out, is that it?"

"Two of us. There's a Bennet girl."

"Is this pit, this Abbeyfield, rich in coal pickin's?"

"We've a secret seam, very deep underground. We found it by chance an' have kept it hidden."

"So that's it," Matt said.

"There's a year's good wage in it. An' it's all ours."

"An' no man knows who you are, Elspeth?"

"I tell them I'm the widow o' a drover."

"An' no man will know me?"

"No, or care who you are," Elspeth said.

Whether she would have chosen Matt or not was of no moment. She had chanced on him and chance had bound her to him. She could not reject him. He was eager, roused, keen for the adventure or the money he might make – or to take what he might from her in other ways.

"We'll not stay here," Matt said. "I've had enough o' the Babylon."

He rose suddenly and grabbed Elspeth's hand.

"Come on," he said. "We'll bide tonight in the Shore Inn, ready for a crossin' first thing tomorrow. Have you chink enough for that, 'Pet?"

"Matt, I—"

His face clouded in sudden anxiety, fear of rebuff. "Do ye not want me, 'Pet?"

Elspeth's heart gave a tumble at the pathos in his voice.

"Of course, Matt. Of course I want you."

"Come then," he said.

He drew her by the hand out of the cellar and along the corridor, shouting out to some unseen person, the owner of the Babylon, that he had no more need of dry straw and that his day's bill for a seat in the dark was paid.

In the street the harlots packed the windows and whale-oil lanterns smoked outside the dismal taverns, flocked with men. The loungers did not jeer at her now, however, and the women in the windows merely stared, for Matt had taken her arm possessively and held her close as they hurried the length of the Babylon towards the Shore.

Elspeth no longer knew what it meant.

But she did not let him go.

EIGHT

Marriage Four Square

It was the gaunt Alicia who brought ruin to the Bontines. She did it adamantly but in innocence. Alicia was sure that she knew more of money matters than the brothers Pryde who, so Gilbert informed her, would have nothing whatsoever to do with mineral investments.

"Has this fellow Bolderon not put an excellent proposal?"

Gibbie was fatigued after a long day in his chambers in Falkirk and a long hot ride back home. All he wanted was a glass of claret and his supper, not a lecture on commerce from his wife.

"Yes, it's a sound venture," said Gilbert.

"What is its essence?"

"The coal pit of which Bolderon's manager requires a modest influx of capital for exploration and development work."

"Which Mr Bolderon wishes you to supply?"

"Indeed."

"And his terms?"

"Bolderon proposes to sell a share of *his* share in the profits for the term of the lease; nineteen years."

"Bolderon is not the owner of the land, is he?"

"No, only a share-holding manager. The landowner retains majority." Gibbie unloosed his necktie, slipped off his shoes, sat back on the little divan. The parlour was misty with the sunset and, apart from the clacking of Alicia's tongue, quite peaceful. "Alicia, may I have a glass of claret?"

Alicia ignored his request. "Why is capital so urgently required?"

"To break into new coal seams. Lines must be expertly charted in advance to save time and money in tunnelling."

"Is the landowner so impoverished that he cannot find money for such essential work?" said Alicia. "Who *is* the landowner?"

"Hector Fotheringham of Placket."

"I have heard of Mr Fotheringham. He married on to the Mitchells, did he not?"

"I really could not say, Alicia."

"What did the Prydes say when you put Bolderon's proposition to them?" said Alicia. "What reason did they give for refusing to consider granting, at least, a loan?"

"Too risky."

"Do you think it's risky, Gilbert?"

"I really do not know, Alicia. Mr Bolderon seems to believe that there's coal in quantity upon the present field, that it requires only a modest investment to make it available to his miners."

"What is a modest investment?"

"Four or five thousand pounds."

"I see," said Alicia. "Mr Bolderon, however, is only the manager."

"With a guaranteed share in the profits."

"Does he *own* property?"

"Alicia, how would—"

"Hector Fotheringham's the person with whom you must make your arrangement, Gilbert," Alicia said. "Fotheringham owns the land. Is it not a fact that reputable bankers will lend money to most landed gentlemen?"

"With some exceptions, yes."

"Write to Mr Fotheringham, Gilbert."

"Alicia, I cannot simply make a loan like – like that."

"The bank would benefit from owning a share of a coal pit, would it not?" said Alicia and, without awaiting an answer, went on. "Clearly, Gilbert, purchase of a share in a coal pit would be very rewarding. It would take the bank out of pennyweight trading with scrofulous cattle dealers and niggardly farmers."

"I would have to peruse the pit's trading account to answer your—"

"If the Prydes will not show a spirit of adventure, Gilbert, perhaps you should lead the way."

"Alicia, I'm hungry and weary, and—"

"Will you write to Fotheringham?"

"Yes, if you wish. But, I warn you, I cannot extract capital from the Farmers' Bank on my own cognisance; at least, not to buy share."

"Use Moodie's money."

"Alicia! Moodie's money lies in trust."

"Does it not earn interest?"

"Well, yes, but it's invested piecemeal; and very securely."

"Are you not responsible for it?"

"The bank is—"

"Take a portion in share; outright," said Alicia. "Make a loan of the residue, up to Fotheringham's needs, at one per cent above rate interest—"

"I'm the banker, Alicia. Please do not intervene in—"

"How much is Moodie's allotment?"

"Twelve thousand pounds."

"Twelve thousand pounds wasted."

"What if she – if Elspeth Moodie should return?" said Gilbert.

"Hildebrand has not traced hilt nor hair of the woman, has he?"

"No, not so far. But—"

"It might lie for years, that twelve thousand pounds."

"On the other hand, Alicia, it might be required next week or next month."

"Where is *your* spirit of enterprise, Gilbert?"

"Well, I suppose it would do no harm to communicate with Fotheringham. I do take your point; he is the landowner and, as such, is the person with whom I should be dealing."

"At last, Gilbert, you're showing some sense."

"Now, Alicia, may I have a glass and my supper?"

"Certainly, dearest," Alicia said and, rising, rang a bell to summon one of the Sinclairs from the servants' hall.

In spite of his best efforts Angus Hildebrand had raised not one scrap of information concerning the whereabouts of the heiress of Moss House. To a degree he was concerned about his lack of progress. On the other hand he relished the challenge of contest with the Moodie sisters. He had all but abandoned his other legal clients to give his undivided attention to the management of the affairs of the late James Simpson Moodie. Hildebrand was an honest man. Even so he would feather his nest quite nicely from extractions made under the terms of the will.

Both he and Tolland were aware that Moodie had taken his own life, had thrown himself into the rushing waters of the Lightwater with the deliberate intention of removing himself from the scene and making the way clear for his wife and daughter to return. It was an act of folly, of madness, of course; yet it had about it just a touch of noble self-sacrifice. It would seem even more 'decent' to Hildebrand and Tolland if only the blessed woman could be found and the martyr's cause given fulfilment in a happy ending.

There was nothing in the wide world that the lawyer could do to expedite that conclusion, however, except exercise his patience and fend off the sisters who had now enlisted the services of professionals to prepare their case for an appeal to the courts. Without doubt, it would take years for a decision to be reached on the matter. Even if it should eventually go against the absent heiress Angus Hildebrand was confident that management of the Moodie case would see him comfortably into old age. He spent a great deal of time as a 'guest' in Moss House, checking each and every item of expenditure that in any way affected the Moodie estates. There was a 'domestic account' upon which Tom Tolland was empowered to draw to upkeep the mansion and to feed himself and his maid-servant.

There was also a much more complex system of accounting related to Kennart mill. To understand the language of the wool-stapler and the manufacturer Angus Hildebrand summoned Robert Rudge to a regular weekly meeting in Moss House. It took Mr Hildebrand several weeks to master the jargon of the woollen industry and several weeks more to pick his way down to those unexplained items in the accounting that seemed to cause Mr Rudge such embarrassment. Mr Hildebrand did not challenge Mr Rudge nor did he pursue his enquiries to the point where he might accuse Mr Rudge of embezzlement or theft. He simply made it very clear that nothing would escape his scrutiny and that in future Mr Rudge had better not be 'embarrassed' by anything.

Among those clients whose affairs Angus Hildebrand did continue to administer the laird of Ottershaw came top of the list. Randall Bontine was involved not only in consolidating the earning power of Bontine lands but in preparing for his forthcoming marriage to the lady from Piperhaugh. To formalise his proposal and make the necessary arrangements in respect of the dowry it had been necessary for Randall to travel north and to put on, for a week of gracious hospitality, his most gentlemanly aspect. When he returned he presented Hildebrand with several contracts that would give him income from the rentals of a nice little parcel of Seaton land to add to that from Ottershaw.

If Randall Bontine was top of Angus Hildebrand's list of important clients June brought him one to add to the bottom – a female of no rank and with hardly a penny to call her own. Nonetheless Hildebrand did not disregard the letter he received from Anna Sinclair. On the contrary, he had reply delivered by special rider within a day of receipt. He was only too well aware that Anna Sinclair's rank might quickly change when her sister returned to claim her inheritance. In due course a meeting was arranged at Moss House. Mrs Sinclair arrived in a gig driven by a fresh-faced handsome young fellow whom Tolland identified as the girl's brother-in-law, Alexander. Anna entered Moss House alone, however, and with a haughty nod to Tolland took herself straight into the drawing-room.

Angus Hildebrand assumed that Anna Cochran Sinclair was concerned with separating herself from her outlawed husband. To the lawyer's surprise, however, Anna's first question was, "Have you heard any word on my sister, Mr Hildebrand?"

Hildebrand said that he had not.

Anna asked then a pointed question about the disposition of Moodie's wealth which Hildebrand coolly answered.

She was a pretty girl, very pretty, with dark hair and eyes. Hildebrand was wary of such beauty. He had not always been a dry old stick and had had his encounters with 'heartbreakers' in the past, usually to his detriment. Offhand he could think of a dozen gentlemen who would have snapped up Anna Sinclair as wife or mistress. She was wasted here in Balnesmoor, lost in Strachan.

Angus Hildebrand cleared his throat. "I believe," he said, "that you wish to discuss the dissolution of your marriage to Matthew Sinclair?"

"Aye, I do," said Anna.

"On grounds of desertion?"

"Aye. Not the other one."

"Other one?"

"Adultery." Modestly she averted her glance.

"As your husband is sought by the law for a crime in which you were not involved, and in which you took only innocent part," said Hildebrand, winding himself up, "there would appear to be no impediment whatsoever to the said dissolution. I take it that you are not currently entangled, shall we say, with another male person?"

"What does that mean?"

"Living as wife to another man."

"I am not."

"No, Mrs Sinclair, I did not believe you were. I merely address to you the sort of questions that a court officer will wish answered before sanctioning your bill of divorcement."

"Matt's a murderer. He's gone for good."

"I must correct you on that score," said Hildebrand. "Your husband, Matthew Sinclair, is *not* a murderer. He may be *suspected* of having committed the crime of murder and, thus, be a person sought by the law but he is *not*, I repeat, a murderer until he is so proven."

"Very well." Anna primped her hair in annoyance. "But he's a – a fugitive, is he not?"

"He is. And you may seek a divorce. And that divorce will almost certainly be granted to you," said Angus Hildebrand. "If you wish it I will represent your petition when the time comes."

"When will the time come?"

"How long is it since you last co-habited with your husband?"

"Thirty-four months."

"Have you not heard from your husband in that time?"

"No, not a word."

"In fourteen months' time you may, therefore, petition the court to free you by divorce from your marriage to this man."

"Will you act as my—"

"If you can afford my fee, Mrs Sinclair."

"What will it cost?"

"Ground of wilful desertion requires an oath of calumny as well as evidence of desertion, even if the accused does not appear to tender objection. In the region of seven pounds would be my charge."

"I'll pay it."

"Seven pounds, Mrs Sinclair? Do you have as much?"

"I can get it."

"May I enquire if you wish to be divorced from your husband in order that you may marry again?"

"I may marry again, aye."

"Will the gentleman pay my fee, is that the intention?"

"Aye, he might."

"It would not be advisable to tell the officer that."

"Why not?" said Anna.

"Heed my advice. Keep the source of payment to yourself."

"I may decide not t' marry, of course."

"Have you been made a proposal of marriage?"

"Aye, I have."

"Have you given indication that you will accept, after you become free so to do?"

"I've said I'll consider it."

"I trust that the gentleman in question is not the young man who brought you here in the gig?"

Hildebrand noted how her lips pursed and a soft flush spread across her cheeks. The polished black eyes were brittle. He had heard that she had a temper and was wilful and, seeing her now, Hildebrand could well believe it.

"I canna marry Sandy Sinclair. He's my husband's brother."

"In that case you certainly may not marry him. It is forbidden by the Scottish laws."

"Even if Matt dies?" she asked.

Hildebrand sighed through his nose. She cared for the handsome young Sinclair, of that he was sure. It might even be that the appointment had been for no other purpose than to have him confirm that she could not, under any circumstance, become wife to another Sinclair, trading the older for the younger.

Angus Hildebrand said, "Even if your husband dies and can be proved to be dead, you cannot marry his brother."

"I thought as much," said Anna. "Aye."

She lifted her shoulders high, let them sink and, in the same motion, flung out her hands, palms uppermost. For all his experience in reading the mannerisms of witnesses and would-be clients, the lawyer could not interpret Anna's gesture. Was she shrugging off her brother-in-law or, God forbid, was she shrugging off the law?

"I cannot recommend that you ignore this point of law," said Hildebrand. "It would be against Christian teaching. Also, in latter years, it will lead to confusion about the status of your child."

"How will it concern Robbie?"

"Take me at my word," said Hildebrand, who did not wish to offer the young woman even the slender hope that she might find happiness out of wedlock in the arms of Sandy Sinclair. "It would not be at all to your son's benefit."

"Robbie has no inheritance."

"Be that as it may, marriage four-square is the only sort of marriage that operates to the benefit of all parties and for the good of our society."

Anna tossed her head arrogantly as if to indicate that she thought herself above society's laws.

She said, "It's of no consequence, Mr Hildebrand. I want nothin' more to do wi' Sinclairs, any Sinclairs, once I'm divorced from Matt. I wouldna have Sandy for a husband even if the law was lax enough for it t' be possible an' he crawled o'er coals o' fire to get me."

"Yet you do have a suitor?"

"Aye. No stable-hand. He's a gentleman, a real fine gentleman."

If the girl had been the victim of an errant rogue who had grown weary of hearthside and a husband's duties, if she had not been Anna Sinclair and a shade notorious, Hildebrand would not have given her the satisfaction of rising to the bait. But he was curious as to the nature of the man who would take on such a firebrand.

He said, "May I ask, who is this gentleman?"

"None other than Mr Rudge," said Anna. "Mr Rudge o' Kennart."

For once, Angus Hildebrand was struck speechless by the *coup de théâtre* that Anna Sinclair had impulsively pulled off and by the little smile of triumph and despair that settled on her lips.

Matt was hard at work within a day of his arrival on the Abbeyfield. Thomas Rance was not wholly taken in by the tale that Matthew Shearer, backed by Elspeth, told to him and suspected that the woman had found Shearer on the dumps of the Coalhill and had lured him away from there as much by her looks as by the promise of fat money. But Thomas Rance, who had a fondness for Mrs Patterson, turned a blind eye on his suspicions. He told Snippets to write Mr Shearer's name upon the books and was surprised as well as gratified when, within an hour of Matt Shearer's descent to the base seam, coal came out to the tally basket.

Matt Shearer did not look like a collier; he was far too large. He had no softness about him, though, and his scarred hands indicated that he was no stranger to hard work. Beard and long locks set him apart from his fellow hewers and he was known, in response to rumour, as 'the sailorman'.

What astonished Elspeth was the eagerness with which Matt fell into the work of coal cutting. He learned quickly, worked tirelessly and did not seem in the least cramped in the tiny seam.

Elspeth remembered her brother-in-law as an idler and shirker. She wondered what had caused the change in him. Was it the events of that night in September when the storekeepers at Kennart were murdered or was it his experiences on whalers? Was it, perhaps, the months spent sucking on a whisky bottle in the stagnant backwater of the Babylon? Whatever had caused the change it was much for the better. At last Matt seemed to have realised that there was hope and satisfaction in honest application, however monotonous and uncomfortable the job.

Each morning Matt was first to the top of the shaft. Each shift's end he clambered from the bucket exhausted and sore but quite undeterred, demanding to be told the weight of his day's cut and how much he had earned on the tally. In the evenings Matt too showed evidence of a sea-change in character. He was no longer the surly boy, sulking and complaining, but immediately took on the role of man of the house with an authority that even Davy came to respect.

Sarah was in awe of the incomer. Mary Jean in her outgoing way soon made friends with him and would run to greet Matt as well as Elspeth each evening and would beg for a ride on his shoulders, to be carried home in high style. Only Mouse did not take to the stranger. She would not speak to him at all. She snapped at Elspeth when the woman tried to foster harmony, would turn pointedly away when Matt made friendly advances, even ignored his peace offerings of gingerbread and almonds. Matt could not replace her father. He was not family, not even a coal-hewer. Mouse could not forgive him for being capable of cutting coal at all.

Elspeth was careful not to reveal details of her past connection with Matt Shearer. By agreement they never spoke of Balnesmoor within earshot of the Bennets, especially Mouse. What Matt did talk of, though, were his days at sea. Burgeoning pride and a desire to consolidate his position made him into a story-teller of no mean imagination. He did not dwell on suffering or reveal the wounds caused by loneliness and hardship. He made tales out of reality, tales worth telling, tales to fascinate Davy, Sarah and Mary Jean.

Matt talked of great ships, jagged mountains of green ice, of a sea frozen hard and thick as a coal seam, of whales blowing jets of steam from holes in their heads. He spoke of the courage of the mighty sea-beasts who would haul a ship for miles, with blood pouring out of them and harpoons bristling in their sides. He made Mary Jean cry out of pity for the big fishies and instantly changed tack to tell of an Irish cook who could play the fiddle while standing on his head and dance a jig in the air. But later, when Mary Jean was snuggled in bed, Davy would draw Matt back to speak of the life of a whale-catching man and would click his tongue and cough, shake his head and say in a tone of wistful annoyance, "B'God, though, I wisht I could have been with you, Matt. I wisht I had the stomach t' be a sailor."

"Aye, it's too hard a drag for you right now, Davy," Matt would say. "But when you're fit an' well again, if the mood's still on ye, I'll see if I can find a kindly captain who'll sign you on for a season or two."

"I'll never be fit," Davy would say.

Matt would punch him softly on the chin and wink. "Best keep well, lad. I'll be needin' a man beside me when we break deeper into yon coal cave."

But it was simpler for Davy Bennet to yearn for the unattainable than to torture himself with thoughts of a goal that he could not quite reach.

In Matt, Davy had found a hero. He wished that Georgie Haynes would come back to plague his sisters. He would tell Sarah, during the long sunny mornings, what Matt would do to the keelman, describe in bloody detail the punishment that Matt would mete out to Haynes, until Sarah would wrinkle her nose and beg him to stop since it was making her sick just to think of it. Georgie Haynes, however, did not appear in Placket in that season.

The colliers did not make Matt Shearer welcome. Like Mouse they resented his intrusion. They vowed that when his giant frame got stuck in some tight hole they would not sweat to fetch him out with a rope round the ankles. He was too large a man for them, too open, too secret, a mystery, a paradox, and not wise in the ways of the coalman's trade. When, on pay-night, he came into the Grapes to buy drink they turned their backs on him and would not reply to his greeting. If Shearer wanted their friendship he would damned-well have to earn it – and that could take years.

"I expected no more, 'Pet," Matt confided stoically. "It would be the same if a wee black-breeked collier appeared in Balnesmoor for the reapin'."

Later on that first pay-night, when Matt lay on the new palliasse he had bought at Nicol's and had unrolled beneath the kitchen table, arms folded behind his head, he had whispered into the darkness, "You're not sorry ye found me, Elspeth, are you?"

From behind the curtain in the corner, Elspeth answered, "I'm anythin' but sorry, Matt."

He laughed. "I feel that I've found my place. Even if it is shut off from light an' air there's no taint o' Sinclair here, 'Pet. No Randall Bontine t' call the tune. It's a proper place this for a blackguard like me an' I'll hold it as long as I can."

Elspeth heard the new straw rustle. She stiffened a little on her mattress in the corner. She half expected him to come to her in the darkness, to show that he wanted more from her than a place on the floor now that he had proved his worth. But Matt did not come near. She wondered at it. She did not realise that Matt had no more desire for her than she had for him, that they were tied by decent needs and cleansed by the sharing of sins and sorrows that had chased them both from home out into the world. She would never be common wife to Matt Sinclair Shearer. The Abbeyfield women could think what they liked. Colliers could snigger over the rolled palliasse and imagine that the sailor was doing a hornpipe of a different sort but what passed between a woman and a man was private and subtle, shaped by the heart to accommodate particular needs and, if nature so elected, might not be a thing of matching and mating but of affection and respect.

Besides, within a three-month, Matt Shearer would find another girl, one who knew him only for what he was and not what he had been before his term in the Babylon.

Randall would have seen through the Fotheringhams in a trice but Gibbie, a simple soul, was completely taken in by the ambiance of Monksfoot Priory. Unlike Keir Bolderon, Gibbie did not find Margaret in the least bloodless. She seemed to him to represent a perfect type of Scottish gentlewoman, beautiful, modest, gracious and touched with piety, a perfect match for her husband, Hector, whose elegance and noble bearing stamped every word with sincerity. Wined and dined on the best that the Priory had to offer, Gibbie was taken to walk about the grounds in the company of the landowner. He was not, however, offered a tour of the Abbeyfield, was not introduced to Mr Thomas Rance or any other person who might spoil the illusion that mining coal was akin to mining gold and as steady as the Bank of England. He was held at a distance by Hector Fotheringham's suavity, but, before he retired to bed in the beautifully appointed guest-room on the second floor of the Priory, was given a folder of emerald-green morocco leather within which, in immaculate copperplate handwriting, were the Abbeyfield's trading figures for the preceding five-year period. The copperplate handwriting was Hector Fotheringham's. The figures would not have been recognisable to Snippets Smith or to the agent in the Bank of Scotland with whom Mr Fotheringham had previously done business. That inveterate reader of *Blackwood's*, Keir Bolderon, would have identified the accounts at once as pure fiction.

When Gibbie dared to mention Keir Bolderon's name, Mr Fotheringham gave a tinkle of laughter and waved away the manager's authority as he might have dismissed a daft gardener, spoke in the sort of indulgent tone he might have reserved for discussing the misdeeds of a scallywag son.

"Quite!" said Gibbie, a shade embarrassed at bringing up the topic. "Quite, quite!"

"So, do you see, sir, how it is with Mr Bolderon? I do not question, you understand, his *intention*. Oh, certainly not. He intends only to do well by me and by the Abbeyfield. But it was *mischievous* of him to pretend to you that he had *authority*. Out of the goodness of my heart and because I value his service I allowed him a share in profits for a limited term; the residual period of the lease, in effect. One must encourage trust, do you not think, Mr Bontine?"

"Indeed, indeed!" said Gibbie.

"It's one's duty to demonstrate to the servant that he is valued, do you not think?"

"Quite!" said Gibbie. Lachlan Sinclair popped into his mind as corroboration. "But is it not within Mr Bolderon's power to promise return on circulating capital?"

"Circulating capital?" said Fotheringham in an odd sort of tone that had Gibbie wondering if he had misused the term. "Oh, yes, I see what you mean, sir. Yes, Mr Bolderon can offer nothing."

"He seemed to think—"

"Nothing."

"Oh!"

"On the other hand Mr Bolderon has done us both a considerable service by bringing us each into the other's ken, has he not?"

"I would say so, yes," Gibbie answered.

Before them lay the silvery Forth, dotted with sails, a plume of smoke from some burning or other lying far off on the nether shore, the hills calm in the approaching dusk. Fotheringham's hand was on his sleeve. Gibbie was flattered by the gentleman's touch, grateful to Alicia for pressing him to this connection with nobility. Even though Mr Fotheringham had no title to speak of, he had a beautiful wife and a priory, owned much land, quality land, not hill acres and bog as on Ottershaw. No doubt he grazed a few cows, perhaps the odd flock of mutton, a hog or two in a sty well away from the gardens but this was land in use, land diligently exploited.

"Let us put Mr Bolderon from our minds." Fotheringham led Gilbert on along a flagged path that snaked through tall clean pines. "If there is to be expansion on the Abbeyfield it will be my doing. Mr Bolderon will not, however, suffer punishment for his zeal, his enthusiasm. He will have what he wants."

"What does he want?"

"A new contract of employment."

"Of course," said Gibbie.

Looking back on it, sadder and wiser, from the vantage point of experience Gibbie saw how Fotheringham had fastened like a lamprey upon his ignorance. He was appalled to realise just how naive he had been and how he had been led without a whimper of protest, figuratively as well as literally, along the garden path. It was inconceivable to him that a gentleman as well set up and as pretty as Hector Fotheringham could be such a blackguard as to take advantage of a simple rustic squire.

Fotheringham said, "Now, sir, what you want, I believe, is to share in the earning potential of the coal pit that stands on and under my land?"

"My bank does," said Gibbie.

"Oh!" said Fotheringham. "I received an impression from – from somewhere – that your partners, the Pryde brothers, were not disposed to invest in minerals."

"They – the brothers are not – they are – reluctant, yes."

"I see," said Fotheringham, "that the Prydes are not men of vision. They lack the spirit of enterprise that moves you so, Mr Bontine."

"They know cattle."

"We all know cattle. There is nothing to know about cattle."

"Quite, quite!" said Gibbie.

"But we – you and I, sir – do we not know *opportunity*? I have already sunk into my coalfield a considerable portion of money. I am not averse, of course, to putting more out to bring more in. On the other hand I do have other enterprises and I have no wish to bind all of my capital to my coalfield, however lucrative."

"You wish, I believe, to finance exploration."

"Opening new seams is somewhat expensive," said Fotheringham. "I seek, therefore, a partner."

"My bank would not, I fear, care to—"

"*You*, Mr Bontine. I am offering this opportunity to you *not* to the Falkirk Farmers' Bank, *not* to the company. Bless me, if the Prydes are so constricted in their view of what will make money why should you include them in our transaction?"

"How – how much money are we talkin' about?" said Gibbie.

"Eight thousand pounds; ten thousand, perhaps."

"Profit?"

"Stake." Fotheringham thought better of the word. "Initial investment."

"On what guarantee?"

"Half."

"Half of what, Mr Fotheringham?"

"Half of all net profits."

"What are the current profits?"

"I have them at the Priory for your perusal and study. Take my word on it, Mr Bontine, they are not inconsiderable."

"Fifty per cent?"

"Broadly speaking, in round figures, it would generally amount to approximately three thousand pounds in the year. That, sir, as I have no need to tell you, is equivalent to a return of thirty per cent on an investment of ten thousand pounds."

"Would you – yes, of course you would – would you guarantee the security of the invested sum?"

"I would put it against the value of the land."

"Monksfoot?"

There was the slightest hesitation, then Hector Fotheringham said, "The Abbeyfield. The pit. As you will no doubt be swift to inform me, sir, the value of the Abbeyfield as a lot does not reach to ten thousand pounds. It is, nonetheless, a working pit and far from exhaustion. Indeed, when the new seams are open and yielding it will increase not only its profit but its worth as security."

"I see," said Gibbie. "It's your intention to pledge the lands of the Abbeyfield as security against—"

"Yes," Fotheringham interrupted. "I will pledge the pit to match any sum that you may care to invest."

Gibbie did not understand the hair-splitting niceties of the amendment. He took it at face value. He believed that he would be protected. Other risks did not occur to him. For instance, he could not imagine that Mr Hector Fotheringham might lose all in another direction and that he would be obliged, as a creditor, to queue with other claimants upon the estate. He could not imagine how death might alter the conditions of the investment and did not precisely define in his own mind the difference between making a long-term loan and purchasing a share of the field. Any competent man of business would have laughed at Fotheringham but the heir of Placket had not reached his exalted position in life without being a shrewd judge of character and, specifically, of discerning weakness, want of bottom and of brain.

The rope was looped, knotted and drawn in a matter of seconds.

The following evening, in the parlour of Strachan Castle, Alicia pulled it tight.

Alicia said, "Am I to understand, Gilbert, that Mr Fotheringham is offering you a partnership in his mining company for ten thousand pounds?"

"Yes."

"Have you perused these figures?" Alicia turned the foolscap leaves of the contents of the leather folder.

"Yes."

"Do you see what the yearly profit comes to?"

"Yes."

"More than double what we accrue from Strachan."

"Yes."

"Twice what you earn from the bank."

"Yes."

"Gilbert, will you kindly stop saying *yes*? Answer me."

"I don't know what to say, Alicia."

"Is Mr Fotheringham a gentleman?"

"Oh, yes," said Gilbert. "But, Alicia, I do not have ten thousand pounds."

"Borrow it."

"What?"

"Is it not a fact that coal-owners become bankers?"

"Well, yes. There are several—"

"Borrow ten thousand from the bank."

"It would eat into our capital assets. In addition, the Prydes would—"

"Borrow from Moodie's fund."

"What if Elspeth Moodie returns?"

"In one year we will have put aside three thousand pounds. In two years—"

"That, Alicia, is beside the point. I cannot use the Moodie fund for my personal ends. Do you not see that it would be against the law?"

"What does the fund currently earn for her?"

"Four per cent in interest."

"Twenty-six per cent; two thousand and six—"

"Alicia, I *can* count," said Gilbert. "Really, you know, I should consult with Randall on this matter."

"Randall is not concerned with our affairs. His head is too full of that child from Piperhaugh. Would Randall consult you on a matter of business?"

"No, but—Hildebrand, then."

"You fool, Gilbert. Angus Hildebrand is *Moodie's* lawyer. He must never learn of our intention."

"Oh, Alicia, it's so dreadfully risky."

"Nonsense! Do you honestly believe that Moodie's sisters will be able to break the will in a court of law within, say, five years?"

"I doubt if they—"

"By then," said Alicia, "we will have earned by our investment the sum of nine thousand pounds, or more."

"We must save the earning, though, as a protection."

"I think not," said Alicia. "If the brat returns, we have a valuable asset to sell."

"Asset?"

"Half-share in a coal pit."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Gibbie. "Of course. The contract of partnership would of itself become a realisable asset. That does rather take the sting out of the gamble."

"Mr Fotheringham would hardly put up his land as security if he did not feel entirely safe in doing so."

"No," Gibbie admitted, "that's true."

"Gilbert, borrow the money discreetly from the trust."

"How much?"

"All of it."

"Alicia, I am—"

Once more his wife put the question: "Is Mr Fotheringham not a gentleman?"

"Yes, yes."

"Gilbert, do you not see that this is our golden opportunity? In five or six years Randall will covet our fortune. Indeed, if that girl from Piperhaugh is the spendthrift I mark her for then it's possible that you might be asked to bid for Ottershaw."

"I think, Alicia, that will not happen."

Alicia wagged the leather folder. "Figures do not lie."

"Well—"

"Gentlemen like Mr Fotheringham do not lie."

"Alicia, let's not be hasty."

"Borrow the money, Gilbert."

"All right. All right. I will."

Summer, in that year of 1817, had a broken back. On the first day of July the long spell of sunny weather broke in rain and gales which did not much abate throughout the month and brought the misery of mud to the cattlemen of Ottershaw and tenants of farms all along the strath.

At Strachan the Sinclairs were treated to rare fits of temper from Lachlan who was frustrated by the condition of the fields and could not reap the crops that he had sowed. Day after day the grieve mooched about the yards, glowering, while rivulets of water ran downhill to the river and tugged away new-turned soil and weakened the roots of growing plants. When Lachlan sought out Mr Gibbie, who was not often to be seen in or out of the castle that month, groused and sought the master's sympathy he was rebuffed by an almost lunatic cheerfulness and the assurance that every cloud had a silver lining.

"What does he know about farmin'?" Lachlan was prone to enquire of anyone in the vicinity. "Does he think the market'll pay money for black potatoes or cereals scooped up like mush? God! But he has no interest in his land. Old Gilbert would turn in his grave at the very thought o' it."

"If this wet keeps up another month, Dad, it'll be a right poor tryst come September," said Sandy, who was no happier than his father at the souring of the summer season.

"Aye, if Mr Gilbert thinks his bank income'll save him he has a shock awaitin' him. The drovers'll not be able to pay their debts on the price these poor drowned beasts will fetch."

"Och, some'll put on weight."

"The late calves'll not thrive."

"We've a full month an' two weeks until harvest," said Sandy. "Perhaps we'll be fortunate an' have a late blink to stiffen the stalks."

Lachlan would grunt at such optimism and tramp away, disgruntled, with a canvas sack held over his head.

As if his father's mood was not enough to contend with Sandy had no consolation from Anna. She was as shy of him, suddenly, as if he had become a leper. He told himself, ruefully, that Anna would never have given him a tumble in any case, and that he was better heeding his father's advice and going out and about in search of a more suitable lass to court and to marry.

Anna's intentions towards Sandy were even less clear. Perhaps it had been in her mind, when she blurted out that she was almost betrothed to Mr Rudge, to goad Sandy into an impulsive gesture, to cause him to sweep her up and carry her far from Strachan Castle. If so she was doomed to disappointment. Mr Hildebrand breathed not a word of her confession, except to confirm the truth of it with Robert Rudge. Mr Rudge had not denied that he was 'matrimonially' interested in Anna Sinclair and enquired rhetorically what harm there was in a bachelor of good standing entertaining intentions towards a young woman who had been wronged and abandoned and who would soon be divorced from her brutish husband and at liberty to marry again. Hildebrand did not reply and kept his opinion of the romance between Rudge and the servant to himself.

In the wake of her strange interview with Robert Rudge, however, Anna shaped new dreams. She began to find the prospect of being pampered by a man rich in experience as well as material possessions rather attractive. She did not doubt that Robert Rudge would love her, and she would not want for matching. He was not handsome as Randall was handsome and did not have Sandy Sinclair's form but it would be a triumph of sorts to be courted by such a man. To be wife to the manager of Kennart would release her from the byre and the servants' hall and bleach out the stain of being Matt Sinclair's wife.

She waited throughout the month for Mr Rudge to make further advances, to press his cause with a letter or a visit, but he did not. She received no word from him in any form and began to wonder if she had dreamed the whole incident. When the rain came and field work was impossible she hung about the hall and brooded. Keeping herself withdrawn, she speculated on why Mr Rudge had teased her with a false promise. The more he neglected her, the more she wished for him – and that was Mr Rudge's strategy, his intention.

Sandy would come to her, seek her out casually, as if by accident.

"What's wrong wi' you then, Anna? Why the long face?"

"None o' your business, Sandy Sinclair."

"Are ye ailin'?"

"No, I'm not ailin'."

"Are ye pinin' then?"

He would try to put an arm about her in the old familiar fraternal gesture but now she would have none of it.

"Leave me alone, Sandy. Damn you, leave me alone."

Nodding, Sandy would step back.

"Aye, it's comin' near September," he would say.

"September?"

"The laird's weddin' day."

"God in Heaven! Do y' think that grieves me?"

"I think it does, Anna."

"I've better things t' concern me than the doin's o' the laird."

"Can ye put him out o' your mind so easy?"

"He's made his choice," Anna would say, haughtily, as if Randall had rejected her for some tinker and had lost a fine chance to better himself in marriage. "Let him stew wi' it."

"Do ye not like it here, Anna?"

She would laugh, false and shrill. "What a question! Och, aye, I just love it here. At everybody's beck an' call. Wi' your sister an' mother turnin' up their noses at me as if I was a brat and not a relative. *I* never killed a man. *I* never burned down a shop. *I* never stole a stallion an' rode away, abandonin' wife an' bairn."

"What if Matt came back?"

"I would turn him over to the officers."

"Do ye say that?" Sandy would ask. "Do ye mean it?"

"Aye, I mean it. I want no more from your brother except t' be parted from him."

"If you were parted from him . . . ?"

"I would find another husband of better stuff than any damned Sinclair."

"Not just – not just run off, Anna?"

"I have Robbie t' think of. I don't want him t' sleep under hedges an' drink from the burn."

"It would be marriage then or nothin'?"

"Aye, Sandy," Anna would say, her tone softening a touch. "Aye, it would be marriage. Indeed, it will be marriage."

"Nothin' less?"

"Nothin' less."

Sandy's conversations, well-meant and kindly, triggered in her a realisation that it would soon be too late to mourn for Randall, that she must be firm with herself and put the laird out of her mind completely. It would be easy to coax Sandy into her arms. She might find satisfaction in it, in deceiving Aileen and Cat Sinclair; it would serve the bitches right for forcing her into a marriage with Matt. But she was reluctant to hurt old Lachlan, who had been kind to her. Besides, now that she had an option in Mr Rudge she could not bring herself to ruin Sandy; she had too much affection for him to leave him with a broken heart when she went away from this place to the house in Drymen.

She wrote to Mr Rudge. She took the letter to the coach office at Mallock, three miles' walk on a dismal day. She paid the due for delivery and waited and, in five days, received a reply.

Edith brought the letter down to her. It had come with the Bontines' packet. Edith and Aileen hovered about while she examined seal and tape and then, with a smile, tucked it unopened into her bodice and refused to tell the women who it was from.

Later that afternoon she stole off to the hay-loft to read what Mr Rudge had to say.

> *My Dear Sweet Anna,*
>
> *With what delight did I receive a missive penned by your fair hand. I had supposed that I had offended you with premature talk of marriage. Many times since that Sabbath have I taken up my pen to express the regard I nurture for you. I was stayed by temerity. I dare not let myself believe that you would think of me as a new-found friend and suitor for your hand. I cannot properly express my feelings for you. I long for the day when you will be free, when I might take your hand and kiss it – and kiss your lips too.*
>
> *Nonetheless, it is to crave your indulgence that is my purpose in this letter. I am separated from you by years as well as miles. My longing is not lessened by the distance between us but I cannot court you candidly as I would wish and shout my love for you from the hilltop for all to hear of it. I will not be so reticent when the happy day arrives when you are no longer wife to another.*

A second page of compliments and assurances followed and the letter was signed with a great flourish – *Your Respectful and Affectionate Servant, Robert Rudge, Esquire.*

It was the first love-letter that Anna had ever received. Randall had never written to her. Matt had never had need. She cherished the letter, admired its floweriness, was warmed by its sentiments. Most of all she valued it as evidence, a promise that, in course of time, she might cash like a banknote for its weight in gold if Mr Rudge should try to leave her in the lurch.

* * *

Marriage was not on the mind of Keir Bolderon in that high-summer season. From Fotheringham he had learned that a financier had been found to develop the Abbeyfield, that the financier was none other than Gilbert Bontine of the Farmers' Bank. He was not overjoyed at the news. Indeed, it was all he could do to hide his anger at being deceived. The future of the Abbeyfield might now be secure but Keir Bolderon needed no fortune-teller to inform him that his days as a manager were numbered. In a stroke, he had become a man without prospects.

Flooding in the upper levels, the collapse of a vent near the Dead Man and other minor disasters required his attention. He could not shirk responsibility to the safety of the colliers no matter how shabbily he had been treated by the landowner. A pit was more than shafts and tunnels. It had character of its own, even a sort of soul. Keir Bolderon had poured his sweat and his savings into it and would not see it drowned by summer floods no matter what became of the place when his contract expired and he was given the boot.

Elspeth spared no thought for managers or landowners. Matt, Mouse and she went down in rain, came up in rain. Droplets shot from the rim of the shaft to greet them and it was almost as wet in the bucket as in a keel-boat on the Forth. Davy had made a recovery from the spring sickness. In spite of the dampness, he did not cough so fiercely now. He was still weak and fearfully thin, of course, and his nature had not sweetened. He was more assertive and voluble than ever. Only Matt could silence him with a sharp reprimand when his insolence became too much to bear.

Matt did not seem to mind the rain. Matt did not seem to mind the slog to the shaft, slippery ladders, the stench of wet flannel. His 'room' on the base level remained dry and warm. It was, he said, more comfortable than the fo'c'sle of a whaler. Meat-fed and muscled, Matt appeared to thrive on the hard and narrow life of a collier. He had 'Pet to talk to and Mouse to tease.

When Mouse wriggled into the trap to assist with loading, Matt would give her a white grin, mop his beard with his wrist, cry out in a collier's whisper, "Hey, lassie, you're damned slow today. Yon gingerbread ye scoffed last night at supper must ha'e been made o' lead."

Mouse would not rise to the bait. She would mutter and curse under her breath and shoot darts of dislike at the interloper. She would not be drawn into trading insults with Matt Shearer; that was too friendly a relationship for a modest pit girl. Matt was patient with her. Elspeth supposed that he had learned to endure the foibles of womankind from Anna, a professor of tantrums. By comparison Mouse Bennet was a mere apprentice. It would have surprised Elspeth to learn that Matt felt tender concern for Mouse. She reminded him a little of his pet monkey, Jacko. Beneath her scowls and snarlings she too was feckless, helpless and much in need of care and cuddles.

Days mounted into weeks, weeks into months. Pay-nights came and went. Matt's haul increased. With increased earning, though, suspicion and dislike of the bearded sailorman grew. The other hewers were jealous and made no bones about it. They did not know, of course, that Matt Shearer had a tall cave to work in and coal that was dense and easy to carve. If he had had to fit his bulk into a thirty-inch seam he would not have taken a quarter of the weight that he did in the millstone cavern.

Matt kept himself to himself and ignored remarks made to provoke him. He had fashioned a life that did not depend upon being his father's son. When the long day's haul was over he had no need for male company, to whistle away to the Grapes for cups of whisky. If the colliers thought he was bedding Elspeth, let them. What did it matter? He was happy. He had learned at last that there was pride in work and in being settled.

Like other folk with less dramatic histories, Matt ate and worked and slept, gave attention to Elspeth and the children and was unaware that a long ground-swell of circumstance was about to lift him once more and carry him, with Elspeth, towards disaster.

Keir Bolderon had kept Mrs Patterson in view, as it were, through the long harassing days of July and August. He had learned from Snippets that there was a new hewer on the books and that Mrs Patterson had had the gall to go out to Leith and find the fellow and lure him back to cut for the family. Snippets was not without admiration for the woman's self-reliance. Even Thomas Rance expressed guarded approval.

"Have you met the man?" Keir Bolderon asked.

"Aye, Mr Bolderon," Thomas Rance answered. "I would not employ a hewer I had not met."

"Quite so. Is he – is he youthful?"

"Some twenty-four or -five years old I would guess."

"Fair or dark?"

"Fair as a Viking."

"Well set, I suppose?"

"Tall. Too tall. He has shoulders on him like an ox."

"She knew him in the past, do y' think?"

"She tells me they had met in Ayrshire, when she was with her drover husband."

"Ah, yes, the drover husband."

"Have I done wrong, Mr Bolderon, in permittin' her to bring an outsider to the field?" said Thomas Rance.

"Can he cut coal?"

"He cuts his share, aye."

"If he can cut, Thomas, he can stay. It's not up to us to question Mrs Patterson's morals."

Keir Bolderon was not overly pleased at the arrival of the male stranger who had stepped mysteriously into the heiress's life and might have knowledge of her past. He must soon make his move.

In the middle of August, on pay-night, Keir Bolderon went to the counting-house to have a squint at Matthew Shearer. He was not a little dismayed at the size of the man and at his bearded individualism. Shearer's drawing was respectable if not spectacular. He took his money with a grin and a swagger that indicated indifference to the colliers' murmurous hostility.

It would be even more difficult than before to reach Elspeth Patterson now that she had this rough, arrogant young man to protect her. Keir Bolderon could work out no feasible means of reaching across the gulf that separated him from the heiress and pulling her from the family circle. All that weekend he puzzled and fretted while grey rain lashed the windows of his house and his servants bickered out of boredom and depression. The gods were with Keir Bolderon's cause, however. If the manager could not weave a fine pattern to save himself the gods were more devious and less fastidious.

It happened in the middle of Tuesday night in some tiny, unmentionable cavity within the body of Mr Snippets Smith; a small thing which, like so many small things, engendered enormous quantities of pain. Snippets' screams awakened his wife. She was greatly distressed by her husband's condition. She imagined that he was dying before her eyes. Writhing and thrashing on the bed, he clutched his back and belly with his fists as if to tear the burning pain out of him. He had a fever too and was not sensible. Mrs Smith sent her youngest girl to run to Mr Rance's house. In haste, Mr Rance ran to the pit, borrowed a horse and rode all the way to Alloa to fetch back Mr Kidson. Such was the state of the weather and the roads that the doctor insisted on half his fee in advance and would not budge until he had received a note of promise for the sum signed by the oversman and witnessed by a servant. It was almost dawn before Mr Kidson reached his patient but the condition had not changed and Snippets continued to howl like a fox with its brush on fire.

By the start of the shift the news was all over the Abbeyfield. Snippets had an inflammation of the kidneys. He was seriously ill and would not be at the tally for months, if he survived Kidson's treatment at all.

Little sympathy was spared for poor Snippets. There was more concern for the accuracy of the tally. Snippets was the fellow they all trusted. He was prim and sharp and correct and as honest as a kirk elder. Now, it seemed, Snippets would be on the flat of his back with a hot brick on his belly and leeches stuck to his flank for a long while to come. There was speculation about who would replace him and if that man would keep the tally exact and count the cash as well as Snippets had done.

When Keir Bolderon heard the news his first thought was that he must assume the chore of acccounting himself. He knew of no other man on the field who had a good enough fist to fill the ledger columns, coupled with an arithmetical brain.

But then, out of the blue, came inspiration. Had he not originally culled Snippets from a weaver's factory? Clerks to weavers were famously accurate in calculations. Did he not have the wife of a weaver – and what a weaver – in his employment?

Mr Bolderon could see no reason why a female could not compile the tally just as well as a man, once you put aside the prejudices and traditions. In a matter of minutes after the thought had entered his head Keir Bolderon was determined. He would give the post temporarily to Mrs Elspeth Patterson. He would bring her out of the pit and into the counting-house. He would have her, in consequence, within easy reach.

Keir Bolderon realised that he was risking the wrath of his colliers by taking such an innovative step. But for the time being he was still manager of the Abbeyfield and might do what he willed with the workers. Damn them! Let them shout and stamp and groan all they liked. He would have the heiress at Snippets' desk whether they approved or not. He could woo a clerk as he could never woo a hauler. He wasted no time in putting his scheme into action.

Elspeth was brought to the counting-house before the shift the following morning. Her hewer and her tiny companion were left to descend to the seam, to speculate on what was happening to Elspeth and what the manager could possibly want with her.

Keir Bolderon had had the stove lighted for, though it was still only August, the dampness had an autumnal edge that made you shiver. Flames crackled cheerfully in the brick cavity and the extra lanterns he had taken down from the shelf made the long wooden room seem almost festive. He had put on his best tweeds. He had had his servant polish his boots. He had even been twice shaved.

Mrs Elspeth Patterson was neat and clean. Though garbed no differently from her fellow haulers, with her hair pulled back and pinned under the cap, the lines of her face showed not just a prettiness but beauty. Her pores had not become coarse yet and she did not squint with the failing vision that was common in blue-eyed colliers.

Keir Bolderon leaned against the counting-table while Thomas Rance, who had been invited to the interview to keep it above the board, hovered by the high desk. On the counting-table were those items – ink and pen and paper –

with which Mr Bolderon would test the young woman's fitness to tackle the task he had in mind.

"I'm sure she can do it, Thomas," he had told Rance.

"Aye, perhaps she can, Mr Bolderon. But *should* she?"

"That's my decision."

"Henning or Elginbrod are more obvious choices."

"Elginbrod is careless and slow; and Henning—" Keir Bolderon had shrugged.

Thomas Rance had made no more argument. Perhaps he assumed that the manager merely hungered for the Patterson wife as a man might hunger for any pretty woman over whom he had a modicum of power.

Elspeth came uncertainly into the counting-house.

"You sent for me, Mr Bolderon."

"I did, Mrs Patterson."

She was nervous but showed none of the squirming petulance with which some of the other young women would have greeted him. She waited, hands clasped, eyes scanning his face for some sign of his purpose in pulling her from the line, in singling her out.

Keir Bolderon said, "I hear that you have improved your lot, Mrs Patterson; that you are no longer in harness."

"I have a hewer, yes."

"I'm pleased to learn of it. You were never cut from the cloth that makes a harness wife."

She took a long breath, released it softly. She was very tense indeed.

Keir Bolderon said, "In your days with the drover, did you learn to read and write?"

"I learned at school."

"School?"

"Aye, in – in Ayr."

"Did you also learn to count?"

"I did, Mr Bolderon. May I enquire what—"

"In other words, Mrs Patterson, you have an education."

"Of sorts, sir."

"Show me your hand. I mean, your handwriting."

She glanced at Thomas Rance but the oversman remained inscrutable. She stared at the sheet of yellowish paper that the manager had put upon the table, at the ink-pot and the pen.

"First you must tell me the reason, sir," Elspeth said.

"Very well. As you'll have heard, poor Mr Smith is sick. He will not be fit to take up employment again until October or later, no matter how he struggles. I do not wish to employ another clerk in the interim, yet I must have the ledgers attended and paying-out done thoroughly."

She closed her eyes, lids fluttering, and pursed her lips and let out a long breath, indicating relief. To Thomas Rance it would seem natural enough in the context but to Keir Bolderon with his knowledge of her past and her present circumstances it said much more. It told him, that gesture, that she had come in fear of discovery, that the mere request for her writing on a paper seemed to threaten her. She did not, Keir Bolderon realised, know that her husband was dead. He felt a surge of gratitude and an odd kind of warmth towards her.

"Is it the job of clerk you're offerin' me?" Elspeth said.

"If you are capable. Will you show me your hand, please?"

She nodded. She came to the table and took the pen, licked the new metal nib and dipped it into the pot, stroked off the excess fluid and, without more than a moment's hesitation, wrote down upon the paper: *"Nobody on the Abbeyfield will like having a woman behind the counting-house table. Mistress Elspeth Patterson."*

Keir Bolderon, watching over her shoulder, laughed. He had an urge to put an arm about her and give her a companionable hug but Thomas Rance had come over too, curious to see what she had written with such swiftness and authority. Rance did not smile. He did not raise an eyebrow at the wit she had displayed.

Elspeth leaned forward, blew gently over the paper to dry the ink and wrote: *"I cannot accept the position so generously offered as it will mean that my hewer, Mr Matthew Shearer, will not have two hands to haul coal for him."*

Keir Bolderon found himself touching her lightly, a hand upon her arm. "Enough."

He shuffled away the paper with its manuscript and brought forward a ledger sheet which he had personally prepared. The sample was exact, eight names, eight entries, but with sums untotalled, the rightward column left empty.

She did not even ask what was required. She turned a little to exclude him and concentrated, did not move her lips much but, in seconds, put down a total against the first name and, a second later, filled in the next and the next.

"You have done this before, Mrs Patterson?"

"For my husband."

"I did not know that drovers kept such records."

"Do you wish me to finish, sir?"

"By all means, do."

Snippets himself was hardly faster and, when he checked off her results against the real page, Keir Bolderon found no error. He felt as elated as if she had signed away her fortune. He could not help himself from giving her a little friendly pat of praise and encouragement.

She said, "I meant what I wrote, sir. I canna take on the clerkship. Your men would never stand for it."

"If you pay them properly, they'll stand for it."

"I've no experience of this sort of accounting."

"I'll keep you right, Mrs Patterson, never fear. In a week or two you'll find your feet and be more assured."

"No, Mr Bolderon. No."

"Because of opinion against you?"

"I have coal to haul."

"Is there not another hand in the family?"

"Davy's too sick to go below ground."

"Bennet's son, do you mean? Yes, I've heard of his trouble. What of the other girl?"

"Sarah?"

"Is she not old enough to pull a sled?"

"Old enough. But—"

"Why are you here?" Keir Bolderon said bluntly.

"What?" The question alarmed her.

"For what purpose do you work?"

"To earn money."

"In that case I'm offerin' you more money for less arduous work. You have more of a talent for desk work than you do for sleddin' or puttin'. Come now, Mrs Patterson, why do you insist on wasting such a clever skill?"

She saw the sort of a trap he had set for her.

"How much will it pay?" she asked.

"Twenty shillings."

The pony was large for the breed, arch-necked and sturdy. In daylight it might have trotted down the moor ridge in an hour and been at Kennart in two, even with a load. But night travel was hazardous and Matt would not risk the broken track that descended steeply over the shoulder of Drumglass. He would go round by Rossbridge, turn down off the moor miles east of Harlwood, cross the Endrick and then the Lightwater behind Balfron and come at Rowan Hill, about the hour of eleven, through the coppice on the long, long route; nobody would expect him to fling so far out from the stills. Besides, the tracks were flatter, less exposed to the half-gale that belled across the Lennox and showed no sign of abating before morning.

Pad Tomelty opened the barn door. Holding on his bonnet with one hand, back pressed against the boards, Pad shouted, "Tread wi' care, Matt."

"I will. I will."

"If it blows too fierce, lie up."

"I'm goin' by Rossbridge."

"Aye, then there's Miller's place t' shelter in, if needs be."

"I know it. Can he be trusted?"

"He can," said Pad. "Listen t' me, son, ye can bide here if the weather has ye worrit."

"The Cunninghams expect me tonight."

"They can wait."

"Nah, nah! On a night as wild as this," Matt shouted, "all the bloody Excisemen'll be indoors."

Pad laughed, shook his head and slapped the pony's rump.

Matt trotted out of the shelter of the barn into a crosswind which, blowing up to a gust, made the pony sway for a moment until it found balance and, tucking down its head, clopped forward steadily.

Eardmore was soon behind. Matt forged on, stooped over the feathery mane to offer less resistance to the flooding air. He was warm enough, for the wind had no bite yet. His belly was snug with the supper Pad had provided. He settled to the ride attentively, though the pony knew the road better than he did and, even packed, was sure-footed and game.

"No."

Alarm again; the reason for it less obvious now.

"No," Elspeth said, shaking her head. "Let me put the matter to them in my own way, Mr Bolderon."

"Will they believe you?"

"I hardly believe it myself."

"It's only until Mr Smith is well again, you understand."

"Aye, sir, but in two months I can earn a half-year's wages."

It was an irony beyond Keir Bolderon's comprehension that she should place such an accent on the earning of a living wage when she had deserted a husband who had left her a fortune.

"Will you go down now?" Keir Bolderon said.

"I will, Mr Bolderon."

"It is, need I add, a golden opportunity for you and for the Bennets."

"While it lasts, Mr Bolderon."

"An answer by noon?"

"Aye, sir."

She left, hurrying away towards the shaft. Only in the haste with which she crossed the yard from the counting-house did her excitement display itself. Keir Bolderon watched her from the open doorway. It was smirring with light rain and dawn had only just managed to struggle up from the east through the cloud. He liked the cheerfulness of the counting-house and, as soon as Elspeth had disappeared, stepped back into it.

"She'll accept I reckon, Thomas."

"She would be a great fool if she did not."

"And Mrs Patterson is nobody's fool, is she?"

"Mr Bolderon, if you'll pardon my impertinence – why are you doin' this thing?"

"Because I need a clerk."

"If she takes the post, sir, it'll mean trouble."

"Trouble? Ah, yes, Thomas. Trouble from the colliers. I think we might brave that, don't you?"

"Trouble for her, Mr Bolderon."

"Mrs Patterson can, I'm sure, cope."

"For forty shillin's the fortnight?"

"Cheap at the price, wouldn't you say?"

"No, sir, I'd say that Mrs Patterson's service will cost us all very dear."

"I cannot share your view," said Keir Bolderon. "Now, if you'll fish out Snippets' keys I'll make ready the ledgers and the cash receipt book. This afternoon, with any luck, I'll have to play the teacher to Elspeth Patterson."

"Unless her man's too proud t' let her take the job."

"A sailor from Leith?" said Keir Bolderon. "He's bound to put money before pride."

"Aye, Mr Bolderon, I'm afraid he will."

Elspeth waited until Mouse had gone into the tunnel, the sled chittering behind her, before she slid through the trap and entered the millstone cave. It surprised her that their secret had remained undetected for so many months. She still hated the high curving slit beneath the millstone slab. Not even the sight of Matt happily breaking up a cut with his hammer could rid her of a sense of oppression.

She had brought a fresh can of water. He paused long enough to take a swallow then squatted, naked save for his drawers, by the cut coal again.

Elspeth said, "Mr Bolderon wants me to act as the paymaster clerk till Mr Smith's well again."

Matt did not seem particularly surprised.

He said, "How long'll that be, 'Pet?"

"Six weeks or eight."

"How does it pay?"

"Twenty shillings in the week."

"Take it."

"Is that all you have t' say? Have you no thought for how your coal will be hauled?"

"It'll be hauled by wee Sarah. She's old enough for the work, Elspeth, as well you know. If you hadn't come to Placket when you did Sarah'd have been down by her daddy's side two years since."

"It's no life for—"

"For any decent person," Matt interrupted. "But it's the buyin' o' bread an' the payin' o' rent. Take the clerk's job, 'Pet."

"The colliers'll hate me for it."

"They hate us now."

"Aye, but—"

"You didn't used t' be so shy, Mrs Patterson. What's wrong wi' ye?"

"I canna understand why Mr Bolderon asked me."

"Because he recognises a lady when he sees one."

"Does he know who I am?"

"God, no! How could he?" said Matt. "He knows only that you've got somethin' the others lack. He wants a cheap hand for his countin' an' he canna find a man who can do the job."

Elspeth could not deny the attraction of a job in the counting-house. She had always been comfortable with books, with pens and ink. Though she was no snob and no idler she knew that the work was suited to her even if she was a female brought out of the ranks. She thought of Mr Bolderon and his kindnesses, never overdone, never effusive. She wondered if he had offered her the surface appointment as a manager or as a man. She found she liked the notion of being close to him, and of having a place of power. Responsibility attracted her. Mr Bolderon would not have given her the chance if he did not think she could cope with it. She could not, in conscience, refuse Mr Bolderon. Could she?

"Aye, 'Pet, I can see in your face how you want out o' this hole," said Matt. "The truth, now."

"Sarah; I—"

"Sarah's not your bairn. Think o' yourself for once."

"Davy's still so weak an' frail."

"But I'm not." Matt grinned suddenly and flexed his muscular arm. "Leave the rest o' it t' me, Mrs Patterson."

"But—"

"Damn it all, 'Pet Patterson. Take the bloody job."

She nodded, relieved and excited by the prospect of working upstairs, close to Mr Bolderon.

She spent the afternoon and part of the evening in the counting-house in Mr Bolderon's exclusive company. She found him patient and attentive. He led her through the procedures and taught her how to translate weight-of-coal into hard cash. He introduced her to the male clerks, Henning and McCaffray. Henning was friendly towards her. He had no desire to take over Snippets' job and its responsibilities; but McCaffray, who was hardly more than a doorman and messenger, was full of prejudice and treated Elspeth with patronising disdain. She had expected as much and did not let it rile her. There would be worse to come when word leaked out that a woman had been appointed to such an important job as paymaster.

The majority of colliers could add and subtract, make the price of three cans of ale or cups of whisky, cost a slither of fresh herring or a bole of oatmeal but they were lost in sums involving hundredweights and pounds sterling. It would be an easy thing for a paymaster to cheat a hewer of a shilling or two on the count, a fact which made the job important and powerful. Elspeth realised now why Snippets was such a martinet and so addicted to ritual. It was his method of demonstrating his firmness and precision. She could never acquire such a character. In Elspeth, however, was a perverse sense of justice. It made her determined to ignore the colliers' taunts, to sit tight on her stool in the counting-house and brave the storms of disapproval that her presence would engender.

Nonetheless it was with considerable trepidation that she embarked upon her first pay-out on a rain-lashed Saturday night in the last week of August. She could not be sure that the sight of a female seated primly behind Snippets' sacred table might not be too much for some men to swallow.

In a nervous voice she called out to McCaffray to open the door and admit the first hewers.

Keir Bolderon placed a hand comfortingly upon her shoulder. She glanced round, saw the manager wink, and looked quickly back towards the door in anticipation of the customary charge.

"Is she there? Is it her right enough?"

"Bloody knock me down! It *is* her."

"What's she *doin'*, Willie?"

"Just – just *sittin'*."

"Is Bolderon there an' all?"

"Aye. He's there."

"Who's doin' the cash?"

"*She* is, damn me if she's not."

"Get in then. The rain's pourin' down my neck, man."

"I'm no' goin' first."

"Here, step aside. *I'm* no' frightened o' any bloody woman."

In he came, bold and pugnacious: McClure, James. He swaggered to the table, not meeting anybody's eye, thumped his fist upon the counter and made the coins jingle.

"Jim McClure," he shouted.

Elspeth licked her lips and lifted her gaze. She dared him to look her straight in the eye. Her stomach was knotted with apprehension and resentment.

The hewer gave the table another rap with his fist.

"I'm not deaf, Mr McClure," Elspeth snapped. "Take your hand off this table at once."

"What?"

"I think you heard me well enough."

"I'll be—"

"If you tell Mr Rance your name once more, Mr McClure, you'll be *paid*."

Nostrils flared, cheeks flushed crimson, little hairs bristled about the man's tight collar. In the doorway a dozen colliers crowded, piled against each other under streaming eaves while McCaffray barred the way with one arm. There was still no press to enter. It was as if McClure had been appointed champion for all.

McClure snorted. He huffed and puffed, while Elspeth, Thomas Rance and Keir Bolderon waited. Neither oversman nor manager said a word. A single word from either of them would have given McClure the excuse he seemed to need to obey the perfectly polite and reasonable request from the blue-eyed bitch at the cash table.

Elspeth swallowed, forced a smile.

"Come along, Mr McClure, before the Grapes runs out o' ale."

The collier made a queer little sound in his throat, a whimper almost. "McClure, James," he said in a quiet little voice.

"McCLURE," Thomas Rance bellowed.

Young Henning had already found the entry. He called out, "James McClure. Seventy-two shillin's, less rent o' two shillin's. Pay seventy shillin's exact, Mr—I mean, *Mrs* Patterson."

Deftly Elspeth plucked the coins from the trays and put them into the big earthenware bowl.

"There you are, Mr McClure. Count it, if you please."

James McClure did not count it. He scooped out the money and stuck it into his pocket and as if stunned by the fact that he had taken payment from a woman and that it was just as plain and painless as if old Snippets had been at the table he blundered towards the doorway and would have reeled out into the rain if McCaffray had not nudged him back to make his mark in the ledger at Henning's high desk.

Stifled laughter caused Elspeth to swivel on her stool. Behind her, half turned away, Keir Bolderon had a hand over his mouth. As she caught his eye he altered his laughter into a fit of coughing.

McClure crossed the floor and went out into the yard.

"Dear, oh dear!" Keir Bolderon whispered. "Did you see the look on his biscuit? He doesn't know whether to hit you or hug you, Elspeth."

Elspeth found no humour in Mr McClure's confusion, no triumph either. She was doing a job that should not – even she believed – have been allocated to a female. But she would do it to the very best of her ability. She too was confused, and not entirely out of sympathy with her male companions.

"NEXT MAN," boomed Thomas Rance.

McCaffray reached out and yanked in another man before he could retreat.

"Napier, William."

"William Napier."

Henning read out the wage.

Elspeth paid the hewer who, pleased with his take, gave her a grudging nod before he advanced to the desk and made way for William Todd and others.

Now that the ice had been broken the colliers soon lost their awe if not their ire and came barging into the counting-house to claim their wages, woman or no woman.

It was all over by eight o'clock.

McCaffray chased out the last wee laddie with a shilling in his fist, put the bar on the door, turned and leaned against it with a sigh. Henning ran his thick forefinger down the pages of the ledger, to check that every man, woman and child had left a sign that they had received their due and closed the book with a snap.

Elspeth was more exhausted, though in a different way, than at the end of a night-shift. Stretching her arms above her head she sat back and, from the tops of her eyes, saw Keir Bolderon behind her like a guardian angel.

"Well done, Mrs Patterson," the manager said. "Even Snippets could not have found a flaw in your auditing."

"Aye, Mr Bolderon, but they'll find fault wi' something else, I'm sure."

"Henning, McCaffray, come an' be paid," said Keir Bolderon. "You too, Thomas."

Elspeth would be last. He would give her the wages out of his own hand, as she, an hour ago, had paid Matt out of hers. There was something wrong in this exchange. It made Elspeth uneasy, though she was satisfied that the job had been well done.

Once Mr Rance had received his hatful of cash he was dismissed, though it was usual for him to wait until Snippets had counted the residue of banknotes and coins and stowed them safe in the strongbox bolted to the floor. Elspeth caught the little nod that Mr Bolderon gave to Thomas Rance, the nod of understanding given in return. Mr Rance left before she could bid him a good night.

Keir Bolderon rubbed his hands in cheerful appreciation.

"Good, good," he said. "Now we'll tidy here and get home to supper." As if the idea had just struck him, he said, "Will you take a bite of supper with me, Mrs Patterson? It's not far to my house an' my servants will have prepared something hot to put upon the table."

Flustered, Elspeth answered, "I thank you, Mr Bolderon, but I have a family waitin' to be fed."

"Of course you have." Keir Bolderon paused, stirred his palm over the coins on the table-top. "There's precious little left after our brethren have had their dues, is there?"

"Where does it come from?" said Elspeth. "The money, I mean."

"From the bank in Alloa. It's earned from coal sales, mainly in Leith – where you found your hewer."

Elspeth had already begun to count the coins. Her fingers were soiled, different to the dirt that coal made. She felt hot now. Rain had ceased and moths and other insects had found their way into the counting-house, drawn by the light of the oil lamps. There was spit upon the floor, plugs of burnt tobacco, mud, and damp maps of rain water. She felt her satisfaction wane.

She counted quickly. Mr Bolderon put the cash into the metal box and the metal box into the strongbox and locked the padlocks with his keys. Elspeth rose from the stool at last, stiff and aching.

"Shall I put out the lights, Mr Bolderon?"

"Aye, do."

She went round lidding ink-pots, drying nibs on a canvas pad and, as she passed, turned out the lamps and lanterns, save for the one that Mr Bolderon required to make fast the counting-house door.

She wanted out of the house, clear of the odour of money, and the gloom. She did not know why it should be, yet she felt again that same threat she had felt all those many months ago when first she entered Placket from the road, not knowing what lay there and what the village offered.

When Mr Bolderon put his hand upon her arm she had to resist an urge to lean on him.

"Mrs Patterson."

"Yes?"

"Your money."

"What?"

"Your wage. You've left it lyin' neglected on the table."

He put the four crowns into her palm. His fingers brushed lightly. He was close to her, a hand still gently upon her elbow. She could smell from him that manly scent of spirits and tobacco but it was not strong and not repugnant. It reminded her, for an instant, of her father. She closed her eyes and experienced a faint astonishing longing to be home again, home with him in Moss House.

In a flash she realised that she had never feared her father's intention towards her, only the manner of the love he bore her, its indecent possessiveness.

Keir Bolderon said, "What's wrong with you, Mrs Patterson? Do twenty shillings mean so little that you can discard them?"

"No, I—"

He took the lantern from its peg and brought it to the door. "I do believe you're blushing."

"No, Mr Bolderon. It's the warmth of the air now the rain's ceased."

She went across the threshold. The ground of the yard glistened with black mud. She could hear a gurgle of water in runnels and ruts, drawing down to the Rutherford burn and via the burn to the river and the sea. She held the lantern while Keir Bolderon locked the door to the counting-house. He turned and, swinging the keys on his forefinger, scanned the workings and the sky with strange affection.

"See, there's the moon, on the edge of the trees."

It was swollen and yellow as a candle flame and streaked by the flying clouds of the rain-storm but the sight of it and the sweet clean smell of the night air and the quietness and the nearness of the man softened Elspeth's fatigue, brought in her again a wistful longing for Balnesmoor, for home.

"Tread carefully, Mrs Patterson."

"Aye, sir."

"Goodnight to you."

"Goodnight."

She picked her way across the yard to the stone path that straggled away from the workings. She paused at the field gate and looked back, hoping to see the lantern, to have a last glimpse of Keir Bolderon as he saddled his mount for the ride home. But the light had been extinguished and Keir Bolderon had gone.

Clutching the four crowns in her palm, Elspeth swung towards the bridge over the burn, towards the smoke-reek of the cottage where Matt and the children waited, hungry for supper before bed.

Changes were in the air in Strachan Castle. The Bontine boys were bound for school in Edinburgh. Their little boxes had been packed bit by bit with clean linen and flannel and Alicia had entered one of her frantic states. Her voice could be heard belling along corridors and through windows and seemed at times to emerge from the very chimney heads as she told the world of her troubles not only in making her offspring ready to be educated but in preparing for the great journey north to attend the wedding of her brother-in-law.

Compared to the heirs in other big houses in the Lennox

Gibbie's sons were not harshly treated. They all knew that mother's bark was marginally worse than her bite and that father, when he was forced to beat them for misbehaviour, could not bring himself to lay on more than half a dozen strokes of the switch. Now, however, they were suffering torments of uncertainty, fired by threats of such vividness and proportion that they wept in corners and cowered quivering under the sheets, haunted by the prospect of an encounter with the dreaded Doctor Creech.

"Wait," Alicia would cry, "until Doctor Creech lays hands on you, my fine fellow. He'll not put up with your wickedness as I have done. There's no charity in Doctor Creech's heart for small boys who do not do what they are told."

Gibbie could offer his sons no comfort. Memories of Doctor Creech still disturbed his dreams. Almost all of the things that Alicia, in her ignorance, said about the great educator were true. Creech had added new refinements to discipline and his severity and strictness had become legend throughout Scotland.

"Latin and Greek," Alicia would shout. "Latin and Greek will give you respect for your dear mother, my lad. Mark my words; you will wish yourself back here before a day of Latin and Greek has gone by."

Latin, Greek and Creech had become entwined in the minds of the young Bontines and they were so mortal afraid of that trinity of demons that they concocted plans to wrap their belongings in a sack and run off to be cabin boys on a clipper ship and, if they had had more gumption, might have done so too.

Only Uncle Randall, in the few brief minutes he could spare for his nephews, offered a modicum of reassurance.

"Oh, school is not so bad," he told them. "I survived it, as did your father. It did not do us much lasting harm"

But Latin – gulp – and Greek?

"Dull stuff," Randall would say. "But not beyond the grasp and mastery of the Bontine brain. Remember, chaps, I beg you, that you are Bontines. Buckle down to your studies with a will and you will prosper well enough."

But – another gulp – what of Doctor Creech?

"Creech is unpleasant, aye; yet he knows where to draw the line. If you do as you are bidden and do not sauce him, he'll leave you pretty much alone. It's only wilful, rebellious boys that he beats regularly."

Uncle Randall's consolations were lost, however, in Mama's awful torrent of threats. Alicia made full use of the device to keep the children cowed while she fretted over her wardrobe for the journey and speculated on how she would be received by the Seaton family. She had sense enough not to burden Gibbie with her uncertainties, for he was absent, in mind as well as body, for much of the August month.

Gibbie had a slippery fish in his fingers – Fotheringham and was intent on holding it while he teased ten thousand pounds from James Moodie's trust and transferred it, two thousand pounds at a signature, through an intermediary account in the Farmers' Bank to Mr Fotheringham's account in the Bank of Scotland. It was not a scheme that required much ingenuity. Gibbie effected it by the simple ploy of hiding from the Prydes the documents by which transfers were made. The brothers were far too busy setting up for the autumn trysts to spare much thought for what Gilbert might be up to.

If Gilbert had doubts about the wisdom of what he was about, he kept his doubts from Alicia who was already behaving as if he had increased their income fivefold. Alicia was spending money with an indifference to debt that Gibbie found faintly awe-inspiring yet he too felt that it was incumbent upon them to make a show of prosperity before the Piperhaugh Seatons. He did not want to let down his brother, and the good name of Ottershaw.

No common mail-stage for the Bontines; a hired coach from Falkirk with teams, driver and footman would be needed to carry the entourage to the wilds of Aberdeenshire and back again. Lachlan would go along as Gibbie's 'man'. Alicia would be attended by Edith. The hire fee, not to mention wardrobe expenses, would cost Gilbert a hatful of guineas but he could not find it in his heart to refuse Alicia her wish to do it in style.

Accompanied by Dunn and faithful Henry Hunter, Randall left Ottershaw early in the month. He was unwilling to risk flood, accident and upset, delays that might retard his arrival. Of course, Randall left Ottershaw ticking like a German watch and in the very best of hands. In contrast, Strachan was put into the care of young Sandy Sinclair, with new grass plantings wallowing in water, many cattle sick with bloat and a general tinpot air of disrepair about the place.

Lachlan was reluctant to leave home. He declared that he was too old for such adventures and had far too much to do at Strachan but when he finally climbed on to the seat on top of the big, polished coach his sullen expression vanished and he managed a wave of his new cocked hat and gave a grin that showed his excitement at the prospect of seeeing the Grampian mountains and the great lush valleys of the north. Aileen Sinclair shed buckets of tears. She might have been waving Lachlan off to a campaign in India or to exile in Australia. But at last the coach rolled off through the gate and climbed on to the Fintry road. With Robbie by her side, his hand in hers, Anna watched the conveyance out of sight.

Anna remained on the path staring at the still trees under calm grey cloud. She was waiting for some overwhelming emotion to claim her; none did. All her despair and pain had been expended long since. Little was left of her love for Randall Bontine save a certain featherweight rancour at how he had abandoned and betrayed her for a lesser love.

Robbie looked up at his mother. She smiled, swept him into her arms and turned to face the castle.

Strachan's façade seemed friendly with possibilities for diversion, as if, with the Bontines gone, she had come into possession of it. She tapped her son on the nose with her forefinger, made him chuckle and carried him around the edge of the ragged lawn, avoiding cow droppings and scatterings of horse manure. She did not know why, of a sudden, she felt so light and relieved. Perhaps it was because she had been freed of the supervision of her master and mistress and the authority of her father-in-law. She had no fear of Aileen Sinclair or of Cat and could twine poor Sandy around her finger if it suited her. For the time that the Bontines were gone, Strachan Castle was her domain and she would have fun. She would begin by playing hide-and-seek with Robbie for a quarter of an hour.

She put the little boy down.

"A kiss an' a cuddle if I can find you," she said.

Robbie, who had often played the game before, scampered off on sturdy legs to hide in the rhododendron shrubs.

Crouching, Anna prowled about the bushes.

"I spy a wee mannie." Robbie held his breath. "I spy him there." Robbie broke and, with Anna in pursuit, ran to another bush, trailing laughter behind him like a ribbon. "If I find him, it'll be kisses an' cuddles for me."

Leaves rustled on the path side. Anna stepped softly, touched aside the moist leaves with her elbow.

Robbie was on the edge of the path, staring towards the gate.

By the castle, cattle grazed peacefully. There was no sign of Sandy, Aileen, Cat, or any of the day-labourers. But riding down the path from the gate came a man on a handsome black horse.

At first Anna did not recognise him. She went quickly to Robbie and folded her arms about the little boy. No matter how much time passed she still feared the unexpected return of her husband, of Matt.

It was not Matt, however, who had come calling that morning.

"Anna," the man called out. She recognised his voice at once. "Mistress Sinclair, how kind of you to welcome me."

She felt her cheeks glow and did not move forward to greet Mr Rudge immediately. She did not understand her own confusion. She wanted him there, to talk with him, to be with him, to listen to honeyed compliments come from his lips instead of a pen nib, to be reassured that none of his promises were being retracted and that he would remain 'devoted' until such time as she chose to accept him in marriage; yet she did not want him at Strachan Castle, put against Sandy. She was afraid of the effect of that contrast.

"Am I not welcome, then?"

Robert Rudge slid down from the horse. He was not so stiff in the shanks as she had feared he might be, though the ride from Drymen or Kennart had been lengthy. He wore no fancy coat. His shoes were plain and grubby, without buckles. His plainness confused Anna further.

"Aye – aye, Mr Rudge, you are very welcome."

"I have come for conversation with your master, with Gibbie."

"Och, but they've gone."

"Gone? To the wedding, do you mean?"

"Aye, only ten minutes since, Mr Rudge. You must have missed them at the gate by a hair."

He nodded without any sign of annoyance. She knew that he had missed the parting coach quite deliberately. He had probably lurked in the woods across the road, well hidden, until it had gone out of sight.

Robert Rudge came to her and took her arm. She could not predict what he would do, how he could act. From the instant of their first 'real' meeting in his garden in Drymen, he had kept her on the hop. It was part and parcel of his wooing. Anna frowned but did not seek to evade his touch.

"Robbie," said Anna, "run on an' tell Grandma there's a visitor."

Her son hesitated, displeased at being cheated of his mother's attention, yet in awe of the tall man with the pale haggard features and the dubious eye.

"Go on, Robbie, do as you are told," said Robert Rudge, without severity but with that firmness which a child respects in a man, be it parent or stranger.

Robbie went off running, arms akimbo.

Anna said, "You did not come to see Mr Gibbie, did you?"

"I came to see you."

"Hah!" said Anna. "Timed t' perfection, Mr Rudge."

"How would you have done it, Anna?"

"The same," said Anna. "Quite the same."

"We're a devious couple, are we not?"

"I – I've told them nothin' of your proposal, Mr Rudge."

"I would have been disappointed in you if you had."

"I told only Mr Hildebrand."

"Seekin' information?"

"Aye."

"For the sake of appearance I had better let you go now, Anna, though fain would I cling to you for the rest of the day; in faith, for the rest of my life."

Mr Rudge's sentiments sounded so sincere that Anna clenched her elbow to her side to retain contact with him for a split second longer. He patted her hand, disengaged and, with the horse following as obedient as a collie dog, moved on with Anna by his side towards the kitchen archway.

Anna's heart was pounding. Mr Rudge's arrival had been so unexpected. Now she must confront the inevitable moment of comparison; Sandy and Robert Rudge would meet, would each sense that the other was a rival. Men were no less sensitive than women when it came to sniffing competition.

Hands on hips, his shirt smeared with glaur from the stable and a smith's short apron flapping at his loins, Sandy called out, "What can we do for you, Mr Rudge?"

"I've business with Mr Gibbie who, I hear, has already gone off to his brother's wedding."

"Did ye not know of it?" Sandy took the reins of the agent's mount and hitched them to the post within the yard. "I thought it was common knowledge that today was leavin'-day."

"I'm not *au fait* with Mr Gibbie's itinerary," said Robert Rudge, a little haughtily.

He sized Sandy up and down. They had met seldom in the past, only now and then at Ottershaw when Sandy had been no more than a stripling and of no interest to the manager of the Kennart mill. Anna watched the men parade for her benefit. Robbie came to her, skirting the horse, and Aileen and Cat Sinclair fell, at that moment, out of the kitchen door, disturbing the hens that clucked and strutted about the inner yard and sending them into a squawk.

Mr Rudge picked a feather from the breast of his coat.

"I'll not stay then," he said.

Sandy said, "It may be that I can help you, Mr Rudge, since I'm put in charge here."

Mr Rudge smiled flatly. "I fear not. It's not a load of hay I require but Mr Gibbie's payment on purchase of several bolts of cloth."

"It'll have t' wait then."

For a moment it seemed that Sandy was about to dismiss Mr Rudge, to hand him back the rein and slap the horse around until it was nosed towards the archway and the road out of Strachan, but Aileen Sinclair intervened.

"It's a long drive you've had, Mr Rudge. Will you no' be takin' a dish o' tea wi' us before you ride back?"

Robert Rudge seemed relieved to be given the invitation.

"I would be delighted, Mrs Sinclair."

Sandy darted displeasure at his mother. How had he divined that Robert Rudge was here because of Anna and for no other purpose? Anna realised that Sandy was even more intuitive than she had supposed him to be. Laughter rose within her, pressing like a cluster of tiny bubbles at the base of her throat. She put a finger to her lips to suppress the sound and watched Sandy, his face coloured and his hair inexplicably spiky, as he sullenly led the horse away.

In contrast Mr Rudge seemed much at ease. He strolled to the kitchen door and doffed his hat, dunted mud from his shoes on the iron and, with Aileen and Cat unctuously urging him on, stooped and entered the kitchen door.

Anna summoned Robbie, lifted him into her arms, hugged him and, with that excuse, let out a little of her laughter. She enjoyed being a centre of male conflict, even if the contest was patently unequal. She was relieved that Sandy was forbidden to her. She did not want love, she told herself. She wanted only that which Mr Rudge had to offer, flattery, attention and security. She was not going to be silly about him. The silly days were far behind her. She had been silly about Randall Bontine and it had cost her dear in the long run.

Marriage to Sandy Sinclair, after the first season of passion had been expended, would be dull, dull, dull. As if he had caught the thought Sandy emerged from the stable and glared at her. He spun on his heel without a word and stalked into the anvil room where, half-shod, his precious plough-horse waited.

Anna stuck out her tongue at Sandy's back, then, with Robbie in her arms, stepped into the kitchen to join the ladies, to take tea and listen to the pearls of wit and wisdom that Robert, her Robert, would drop into the Sinclairs' unappreciative ears.

It was almost two o'clock before the tea-taking was over and Mr Rudge bid farewells to the Sinclair ladies and suggested, quite candidly now, that Anna might walk with him to the gate to ensure that he was not set upon by the heathen tribes from the hamlet of Strachan. Mr Rudge had apparently succeeded in charming the kinfolk of his intended, and even this little parting joke sent Cat into another peal of laughter for, being a native of Balnesmoor, she felt superior to other provincials and was delighted to endorse any insult towards them.

There was no sign of Sandy. He had not come in for his midday bite and Mr Rudge's horse had been left, fed, watered and rubbed down, tethered to a post in the shade. A thin haze of late-summer sunlight had struggled at last through the cloud.

"You did well, Mr Rudge," said Anna.

"Perhaps you had better call me Robert. When we are alone."

"Robert."

"Is he my rival, Anna?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Sinclair, the smith."

"He's my husband's brother."

"I did not ask if you could wed him; I know that you can't. I asked if he was my rival."

"Mr Rudge, Robert, you have no rival."

"Does he not come t'your bed?"

"What sort of question is that, Mr Rudge? It's indelicate, an'—"

"The sort of question a man like me can put to you, Anna, without offence. Come now, we're not star-crossed and dewy, are we?"

She did not like this strain of conversation. She preferred oratory, arabesques, pretty compliments, even if, at heart, she knew them to be superficial. She *hoped* that they might contain some grain of truth, some sort of reality. She did not wish to marry a man who was so uncannily aware of her vices and her calculations.

"*Does* he come t'your bed, Anna?"

"No. No, he does not."

"Never?"

"Never."

"I would not want him to," said Robert Rudge.

She looked up at him, faltering.

"I'm not yours yet, Mr Rudge," she said, pleading with him inwardly to say more, to give her a reason for virtue. "Besides, is it different for me than for you?"

"Oh, yes, Anna, of course it is."

She accepted that fact. She had been reared with it. A man might be wild and profligate and receive no more than a certain superficial censure for his behaviour but a woman, even a servant or a field-hand, was supposed to be chaste and modest and without impure thoughts or carnal desires. Randall had told her as much many a time, making a joke of it, but she had been cuddled in the laird's bed and had thought of the meaning not at all.

Anna said, "When I come down t' Kennart mill how many lassies can I look in the eye with the sureness they've not enjoyed your attentions?"

"A few," Robert Rudge said. "But only a few."

He did not preen himself on his ability to seduce women. He looked down at Anna with a sober and sincere expression. "But none, none at all, since that afternoon in the garden."

"Did y' mean everythin' you wrote to me?"

If he had come out with an answer immediately she would have been suspicious and still on her guard. But Robert Rudge was honest enough to hesitate. He gave a faint purse of the lips, a restrained smile. "*Most* of what I wrote."

"Dear God!" said Anna. "I never thought—"

"Is the rake, the lecher, the man of bad reputation not entitled to fall in love, Anna?"

"Not without a reason."

"Love is the reason."

"I – I canna believe it."

"Don't," said Robert Rudge. "If you believe it too soon, without a true proving, then you are as doomed as I am."

"What do ye say?"

"One fool in the household will be quite enough."

They had not stopped walking along the curve of the gravel path that bounded the ragged lawn.

Cattle grazed about the gate where tasty weeds sprouted along the wall and blueflies buzzed and dung smelled strong in the unaccustomed warmth. High above the trees, pinned over the moorland, two buzzards circled, uttering that high, *kee-kee-kee*-ing cry that was at once both plaintive and barbarous, a lost and liquid sound that was beaked and barbed only to small cowering creatures in the bracken below.

Robert Rudge halted. He looked down at Anna.

"I think that if you kiss me now, Anna, I shall be your slave for ever."

Her lips were dry, her heart pounding again. Deliberately she raised herself on her toes and pressed her breasts against his chest, placed her lips to his. Robert did not grab her, did not display eagerness in response to her touch. Anna did not want it of him, not there, not then. Lightly she held herself against him for a moment or so and then let go.

She tried to think of a jocular remark but could not.

Robert looked so serious, so distinctly unhappy, and not in the least superior.

"Does my kiss not please you after all, Robert?" Anna said, at length.

He swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing. "It pleases me too much."

"Too much?"

"Now I'm truly doomed."

She could not decide whether he was being pretentious or intended it as a joke.

Robert gave her no clue as to his feelings. He took off his hat, presented her with an old-fashioned bow, stuck the hat on the back of his head and swung himself up into the saddle.

Puzzled, Anna watched him ride away through the gate. She frowned and scampered after the departing figure, out on to the Fintry road.

"Mr Rudge? Mr Rudge? Robert?" she cried.

He reined the horse, turned in the saddle.

"Will – will you write me more letters?" Anna called out.

At last he smiled, appeared to shed ten years.

"As many as you like. Provided you reply in kind."

"I will. I will. I promise," Anna said.

Robert Rudge snatched off his hat, spurred the horse and, pretending that he was still a wild young buck, galloped rapidly off along the road and vanished out of sight round the bend.

It was Elspeth's second pay-out Saturday before Davy plucked up courage to ask Matt to take him to the Grapes and buy him a tankard of brown beer from the big barrel that was roped to the trestle in the inn's main room.

The idle monotonous life of an invalid was hard for Davy to bear, particularly now that he was alone all day without Sarah for company and Mary Jean's chatter to divert him. He was aware, by instinct, that quietness helped the soft processes of healing and he had sufficient sense not to strain his strength or squander it. He did odd chores about the house. Now that Sarah had become a pit-hand, all black and exhausted like her kin, a certain guilt overrode Davy's innate manliness and, behind a barred door, he scrubbed and chopped vegetables, steeped barley for broth, cut and seasoned meat for stews and even tried his hand at baking bread – a disaster – one lonely boring afternoon.

For the most part, though, Davy brooded. He had long ago rejected self-pity and did not whine much or complain. He had seen young children die, too many of them to cherish a belief in immortality. He had heard travelling preachers cry out that death was payment for wickedness and that the child would burn in the fires of hell, visited by the sins of the fathers. Davy did not understand what the preachers meant. When he thought of his father, which he did often, it was without rage. He thought of his father as the ghost of the man he, Davy, had never become as if he too had died in the seam. But he had not died. He had lived, would live – though what would become of him when Elspeth and Matt grew weary of the Abbeyfield and sick of Mouse and Sarah – aye, and crippled Davy too – and took the bairn and went away, he could not imagine.

Billy Mackenzie had been found dead in a seam. Billy Gibbon had taken a fit of the vomit and choked before his father could find him at shift's end. Gordon Lewis died of a fever, Janet Lewis of the same fever. And Long Jack Lowe of a wasting fever that had rotted his lungs. Long Jack had been fifteen, old enough to fight his way down the shaft each shift and hew coal from the wall until the day he breathed his last, slouched in the bucket, the rope creaking, while his wee brother, Hugh, held his head and cried, "See, Jack, see the light," as if light alone could heal him, like a miracle done by Good Lord Jesus long, long ago.

Davy had come out of the real world into a world of doubt and speculation. His thoughts moved about the question of whether this sort of life was better than no life at all; and if there was a Hereafter would he meet his father there and would Daddy take him to coal and would they be able to cut side by side, whole and strong and tireless, the pair of them. Davy found it impossible to imagine that all angels were white. He could grasp a vision of toil without pain, effort without exhaustion and even in the midst of childish uncertainties he was sure that Good Lord Jesus would not condemn a boy to eternal idleness, no matter how bad he had been.

Davy clung to Matt Shearer. He could no longer command the respect of his sisters since they were earning wages and he was not. He no longer trusted Elspeth. She had gone to the desk and the counting-table, had joined Mr Rance and Mr Bolderon, men put up as enemies of his class. Davy felt that only Matt understood him. Matt had been low too, before he had become a brave whaling-man. Matt would not pamper him just because Elspeth said it was wise to have him rest.

Davy would ask his sister, "What's wrong wi' you, Mousie? Why will ye no' talk to Matt?"

"I *hate* him," Mouse would answer, still.

It would be better for them all, Davy decided, if he could go below, be in the seam with Matt. He would snap Mouse out of it, would see that she worked hard, that she did not overload Sarah's sled, since Sarah was thin and not used to the tunnels yet. But he could not con Matt here at home, not with the tousled sick-bed behind him, not in his damned nightshirt, with his sisters sticking their noses in.

Davy was all dressed, spruce and eager, when Matt came trudging in from the counting-house that Saturday night. It was not quite dark yet, though the nights were drawing in and there was a nip of frost in the dampness of the mornings.

"Well, will ye be headin' into Placket, Matt?"

"Nah, nah. We've provisions enough for tonight. The lassies can go if they're keen for a sweetmeat or a new ribbon."

"I – I could do wi' a taste o' ale, Matt," said Davy.

Matt had slept until three o'clock that afternoon and was rested and fresh and not wholly inclined to spend another evening shuttered in the cottage. He resisted, nonetheless.

"It's too far for ye t' walk, Davy. I'm damned if I'm carryin' you on my back."

"I can walk fine, for God's sake."

"I'm more in need o' food than drink."

"Sarah'll have the supper ready by the time we get back."

"Sarah's fair done," said Matt.

"Mouse can help her. Come on, come on, Matt. I'm dry as a husk for beer."

"I'll fetch ye a can, then."

"I'll go m'self, if you'll lend me fourpence."

Matt shook his head. "Well, since you're all shiny an' keen, lad, I'll wander that way wi' ye. Will I leave a message on the slat for the girls?"

"They'll know where we've gone. Come on."

If Elspeth had been there she would have forbidden him the adventure. It would be the first occasion since the spring that he had crossed the Rutherford burn and on to the road, that he had walked further than the near shore. But he had no crippled feeling on him now. His chest did not hurt and the cough was only an occasional irritation. He wanted out of the prison of the cottage, wanted Matt's company, his attention, and the colour of the Grapes in his eyes, its chatter in his ears.

Matt did not walk quick enough for Davy who hurried the man along as if he was the stronger of the two.

"Steady, Davy, steady. I'm weary still."

"She sells pies, does Mrs Figgens, if you're starved."

"Aye, I've seen her pies, an' they're terrible."

"Salty, aye, but that just spices the beer."

"Did ye go often t' the inn wi' your father?"

"Every other Saturday," said Davy, lying.

"Is that so, now?" said Matt without a trace of scepticism.

If Davy was shaky after the walk he gave no sign of it and managed to march boldly along the final stretch to the inn.

Ahead there was Placket, its blunt tower, its fish smell, the glow of lights from the square dabbed on the sky. It seemed like years since he had been here last.

Matt had been paid early, given his wage not from Elspeth but from Mr Bolderon, to assure the other colliers that there was no deception or favouritism. There were women on the road, though, and a handful of colliers wending back over the bridge towards the inn.

The wooden doors of the Grapes stood open. It was too soon into the evening for the fiddler to have turned up and there was no hubbub from the inn room. But the light itself was the colour of good ale and you could catch a whiff of whisky, sharp as a herb on the wafting breeze. Davy gave a great sigh of pleasure. He clamped his hands to his thighs to stop them trembling and swaggered into the inn ahead of Matt Shearer.

Georgie Haynes was the first thing that Davy saw.

Haynes was standing by the long trestle, a tankard of beer in his fist. The skipper and the other one off the *Matchless* flanked him. Georgie Haynes was caught in laughter, head back, teeth and tongue showing. The braying sound cut off when he caught sight of Davy Bennet and the man behind him.

"Aye, aye. An' what have we here now?" Georgie Haynes demanded. "It must be the night the fairy folk ride out."

Matt had heard a version, three versions come to think of it, of Georgie Haynes' assault upon the privacy of the Bennet family, of his lustful interest in Elspeth. Matt recognised the keelman without introduction. He put his hand at once on Davy's bony shoulder and held the boy still.

At the long table were three or four colliers. They were all sober and not at all inclined, Davy guessed, to cross the keelmen. It had not occurred to him that Georgie Haynes might still call in at this particular port, for, stupidly, Davy had imagined that the keelman would be too ashamed to show his face near Placket.

Legs trembling uncontrollably now, his face suddenly on fire, Davy leaned back against Matt and hissed, "That's him. That's Georgie Haynes."

"Aye," Matt murmured. "So I can see."

Haynes said, "So you're the mannie they brung from the whalers, eh? Blubber left over, eh? You're the mannie that sticks it –"

"I want no trouble here," Matt interrupted.

Davy glanced round. Matt's blue eyes were hooded. In the hair of his beard his lips seemed pink, not red, pressed into a thin, angry line.

The old keelman, the skipper, had detached himself from the table and had his fingers on a big wooden cog that contained hard-boiled eggs pickled in oil and vinegar. The man called Lewis was smiling, shaking his head a little bit as Georgie Haynes went on, "Or is it the boy here? Is he what y' fancy, whaler, eh?"

Davy said, "Matt?"

Perhaps he had guessed that Haynes would be here. Perhaps he had hoped that Haynes would challenge Matt, knowing that Matt would whip the bullying keelman even with odds against him.

Davy's heart flittered against his ribs. He was entitled to retreat and nobody would hold it against him; he had been sick and could not fight. But he had brought his champion, Matt Shearer, in his stead. Matt would beat Georgie Haynes so sore that the keelman would not dare show his face in Placket again.

"Go on, Matt. Go on. Hit him."

With a glance at his companions Georgie Haynes casually dropped the tankard to the floor.

Mrs Figgens was behind the trestle along with her elder son, William. They would not interfere. They knew that colliers and keelmen could afford to pay for damages to the premises and that it was too early for a brawl to harm the drinking-trade.

"I know ye ducked me." Georgie Haynes addressed himself to Davy. "Since your mottes aren't here I'm goin' t' gut you in their stead."

The knife had a handle of cork and twine, a short thin little blade with a curve to it, the kind that fishwives used to gut herring. It appeared in Georgie Haynes' fingers as if by magic.

"Take him, Matt. Take him quick."

Smirking, Georgie Haynes stepped forward, the knife lightly cradled in his palm.

Davy had never seen steel drawn in a quarrel before. Fights between colliers were with fists, knees, sometimes feet, but never with a weapon, never dangerous to life. He huddled involuntarily against Matt and then was lifted and flung towards the inn door.

Sprawling, he twisted his head, expecting Matt to tackle and disarm the keelman. Matt did nothing of the kind. Though Matt's fists were clenched so hard that his knuckles were white and his shoulders quivered with rage, he did not advance on Georgie Haynes.

The keelman taunted him again, calling him a yellow-belly, insulting Elspeth, Mouse, even their daddy, though he was dead and could not protect himself.

"Matt," Davy cried.

Matt would not be urged or tempted. Saying nothing at all, Matt stepped back. He groped for Davy's arm, hoisted the boy to his feet and dragged him out of the door and across the sward to the road. Matt had retreated before the bully, before the threat of a little knife.

Davy was thunderstruck, mortified and ashamed, sick at the realisation that Matt Shearer was no hero but a craven coward. If Matt had been beaten in a fight then Davy would have admired him all the more. *But not to fight at all*; how could that be? How could a man do that? How could Matt so let him down?

They were scuffling along the road away from the inn now, Matt still dragging Davy by the arm, Davy shouting, "Matt, go back. Go back an' fight the bloody keelman," and Matt saying, "You canna understand, Davy. I dare not fight him. I dare not."

Breathless and gagging, Davy tore his hand from Matt's grasp, rounded on him.

"Matt Shearer, I thought—"

"It's no' what it seems, Davy."

"Bastard! I wanted you t' take me down wi' you. I'll never work wi' you now, y' coward."

He spat saliva with a little furious motion of the head. He saw spit adhere to Matt's jacket, then, before he could be felled by the exhaustion that such a large emotion might bring, Davy set off at the double along the road to the Abbeyfield.

Matt did not pursue.

Matt stood disconsolately in the dusk while women and girls coming up from the field to the village passed him and stared at him, giving him a wide berth.

After a time, though, Matt too went – hurting – homeward, because he had no place else to go.

"Is Mouse sleepin'?"

"Aye, they all are."

Pretending to be fast asleep, Mouse lay very still. Elspeth had come to the side of the dresser, stooped and peered in at her. She had kept her breath flowing, her mouth open and had somehow prevented her eyelids from flickering until the candle had gone away and she had heard Elspeth tell Matt in a soft, soft voice that Mouse had dropped off too and that it was safe for them to talk.

It had been a strange, diverting evening. Mouse could not decide whether she had enjoyed it. She understood, of course, what had happened and why Davy was so mad.

It had been Georgie and Georgie had met Matt and Georgie had stood up to Matt because Georgie was jealous of Matt living with her and thought that Matt had the run of the house and the women in it, and was jealous of Matt's closeness to her and, perhaps, to Elspeth since Elspeth was older. But Matt had not cared enough or was, as Davy claimed, a yellow-belly and a bloody liar and a coward.

Davy would not speak to Matt. Davy had rolled into his bed with all his clothes on and would not speak to Sarah and had frightened Mary Jean and made her cry, and then, to her, to his sister Mousie, had blurted it out. He had shouted that she had been right not to make friends with the bastard stranger, the bloody sailor, who was worthless and a coward.

They were of a size, Matt and Georgie. Mouse thought of each of them with longing. She was afraid of the feeling and yet revelled in it. She had never felt as she had done when Georgie touched her. She knew that he had a power Daddy had never had, Davy never would have. She had felt that power in Matt Shearer too. She resented the fact that he belonged to Elspeth and shared secrets with Elspeth and treated her, Mousie, like a bairn.

Elspeth had come in from the counting-house all neat and strange in her plaid dress, not one of them any longer. Elspeth had shaken Davy and tried to make him tell her what was wrong. It had been left to Sarah to tell Elspeth what had happened. Elspeth had been quiet, too quiet, and had not chided Davy at all.

Elspeth had concerned herself with Mary Jean and had said very little until Matt had come in five minutes later, then she had gone to him and had taken him by the arm and led him outside to talk in whispers, soft whispers in which there was a note of consolation, as if Matt had suffered a grief the way they had done when Daddy was killed, the way Mr Bolderon had spoken that day at the kirkyard.

Elspeth had been so distracted upon her return from work that she had just tossed the four crowns upon the table. The big round coins glinted among the flour dust and the wet patches where cabbage had been chopped and the penny-sized pools of blood from the meat that Sarah had bought from Mr Nicol's earlier on. Mouse wondered where Matt hid his money. How much had been earned that fortnight? When would he remember to dole out her share? He was usually prompt on that score. She had no need of the money. She had eight pence left from last pay-night, eight pence tucked into the toe of a slipper she had outgrown but kept because the pair were of red kidskin and Daddy had given them to her when she was very young, along with a pink scarf which she had long since lost.

Matt had eaten bread and tea. Elspeth had fed Mary Jean, and Sarah had drunk tea for they had eaten earlier in the afternoon. Elspeth picked at scraps and looked at Matt as if she wanted to take him into her arms or tell him something that should not be heard by other ears. Meanwhile Davy lay below the bedclothes pretending he could hear nothing.

Sarah soon put herself to bed. Elspeth had made Mary Jean comfortable and had sat with her behind the curtain while Matt slouched at the table, cheek on his hand, stroking his beard, his blue eyes full of something that Mouse could not name. Mouse had wanted to put her arms about his neck, to slide on to his knee, touch him, comfort him. But she had chosen her attitude and would stick to it because it was easier than changing. Matt looked so sad sitting there at the table, staring at nothing, remembering, perhaps, the big jagged mountains of ice that grew out of the seas where the whale lived.

"Is Davy sleepin' too?"

"Dead to this world," said Elspeth.

"I never intendit t' let the boy down," Matt said. "If it had been a less public place than the Grapes I might have lost my temper an' taken on the swine."

"You were right to turn away, Matt."

"Nah, nah, 'Pet. I was wrong – as usual."

"But if there had been bloodshed it would have brought the Sheriff's man or the Riding Officers. Mrs Figgens would have sent for them. They might have recognised you."

"It wasn't for that reason I turned tail, Elspeth. When I saw the knife it reminded me o' that night at Kennart. God, I'm no' scared o' Georgie Haynes. I'd take him on in a split second if he showed his face here."

"Georgie Haynes'll not come here," said Elspeth.

Hardly daring to breathe, Mouse listened. She could not fathom what Elspeth and Matt Shearer meant to each other but she was more convinced than ever that they had known each other well some time, somewhere in the past.

"Aye, Haynes'll suppose you're protectit," said Matt. "Protectit by a coward."

"Matt, Matt, Davy'll not hold it against you for long. You'll see, he'll come round in a day or two."

"He wants me to tak' him below."

"Oh, no. I'll not allow it."

"He thinks, since I'm the bread-earner, I've the final say."

"It might please an' flatter him," said Elspeth, "but in a matter of days, a week at most, he'd be in worse health than ever. No, no, Matt. You must be firm with him. I'll not have Davy waste away out of stupid pride."

"Pride's not stupid, 'Pet. I wish I could afford more of it," Matt said. "But, aye, you're right. Davy would suffer ill in no time at all if he had t' work below ground again. God, he's so thin an' weak. I fear, even as it is, he might no' be with us long."

Mouse frowned. Stirring slightly, she lifted her knees and put her hands to her face, her thumb into her mouth.

Matt and Elspeth were silent for two or three minutes. She heard the clank of the kettle, the dribble of water, smelled the aroma of a fresh brew of tea. She wondered if Mam and Daddy had ever sat drinking tea at a late hour, talking, just talking. She could not remember now.

"Would he fare better in Balnesmoor?" said Matt.

Balnesmoor; Mouse had heard them mention the name before. She did not know where it was. It was not a name that colliers bandied about or that Daddy had ever used.

"Gaddy would have pulled him round," said Elspeth.

"Gaddy, aye."

"Why did you treat her so badly, Matt?"

"I was o'er young t' be married. I blamed Gaddy, your mother, for hastenin' me into it. Even you must admit she acted like lightning after – you know."

"If it had not been for Mam would you not have sought t' marry Anna?"

"How can I say now? Perhaps; perhaps not. I had no choice, 'Pet. Between my father an' your mother I was fixed, like a bullock, by the nose."

"Would you – would you have sought to marry me?"

"No."

"I'm not flattered, Matt."

"I – I liked you, 'Pet, but you were too like your mother, like Gaddy Patterson. It's odd – we all thought so – that *you* were the foundlin', yet you were the one wi' all Gaddy Patterson's qualities, good an' bad."

"Bad?"

"Aye, you'll have your way, come what might. You're loyal but o'er pressin' for a woman."

"Am I, even now?"

"More so than ever."

Silence: Mouse sensed that Matt had hurt Elspeth.

How did Matt know so much about Elspeth Patterson? It seemed that he had been married to her sister at one time. If so, where was the sister now? Puzzling out these mysteries tired Mouse but she willed herself to stay awake. She had a hint of other secrets and the answer to something that had bothered her a lot. Matt, it seemed, had no designs at all on Elspeth Patterson. They would not match, would not, one night, roll and grunt together behind the curtain. The realisation brought Mouse a sensation of warmth in her belly, a strange disquieting feeling.

"Have I hurt you, 'Pet?" Matt said.

"No, no."

"You shouldna be injured by such comparisons. God, every man on Ottershaw admired your mam. Some would have had Gaddy if they had not been feared o' the talk. My father too."

"Lachlan?"

"Aye, the righteous grieve. I remember how my mam worried o'er it when Gaddy was free, after Coll died."

All these names; Mouse was confused. But she was as certain as cheese that Matt and Elspeth had a secret, that some dark cloud hung over them both. Had Elspeth been a lady once? Had matchin' brought her down?

"I never guessed it," Elspeth said.

Silence again: Mouse did not stir this time. She sucked her thumb without a sound and breathed into the palm of her hand.

"Will you ever go back, Elspeth?" Matt said.

"I – I canna," said Elspeth.

"Because o' what I told you about James Moodie? Because he was – and he *was* – involved in murder?"

"That reason first," said Elspeth.

"Did he beat you?"

"No. He was kind. But he was wicked, Matt, in other ways. Do not ask me. I've no wish to speak of it."

"He frightens you?"

"Yes."

"At least, if it comes to it, you *can* go back home."

"What would become o' these children: Davy, Sarah, Mouse?"

"Ach, they're collier bairns. They'll survive."

"Davy too?"

Matt did not answer.

Elspeth said, "Now I'm settled behind the countin'-desk, I think Mr Bolderon might keep me there."

"I doubt if Bolderon'll last long on the Abbeyfield. I've heard from Thomas Rance how his agreement wi' the owner expires soon an' how he canna find capital t' buy in again."

Mouse did not understand this turn of the midnight conversation. She was impatient with it. She did not want to hear of Mr Bolderon and Thomas Rance. She wanted Matt to talk of her again, to lay out like a roll of fine silk some attractive future that would include them all, even Davy.

Matt said, "I think he'll take you wi' him if he leaves here, 'Pet."

"He's said nothing to me on the score."

"He'll be bidin' his time. He's picked you for somethin' other than a paymaster, Elspeth," Matt said.

"He supposes me t' be a widow."

"Let him think it."

"Matt!"

"God, there are worse things than havin' two husbands."

"I'd have to tell him the truth. I couldn't deceive him."

"Oh-hoh! It's in the wind, is it?"

"I – I believe it might be, in due course of time. He's full of attentions and charm."

"Be careful, 'Pet. It might no' be marriage he's after."

"Mr Bolderon's a gentleman."

"I have my doubts about that," Matt said.

"What about you, though?" Elspeth said. "My sister'll seek a divorce in course of time. I know her. She'll want t' be free again."

"Free for the bloody laird o' Ottershaw t' take his pleasure wi' her."

"Matt, you canna defend against divorcement."

Matt did not comment or protest. He said nothing.

Elspeth said, "Will it hurt you t' lose her?"

"Nothin' from the past hurts me now, 'Pet," Matt answered. "But havin' Anna taken from me by the process o' the law would be the least hurt o' all. Hah! Would it not be an irony? I would still be an outlaw, a lost man, but I would be free t' take another wife."

"You? Who would you want t' marry?"

"Mousie, perhaps," Matt answered.

It was all Mouse could do to keep her legs from jerking in astonishment, to prevent herself sitting bolt upright with a cry. She would not have known what words to use, whether to choose outrage or delight from the rattlebag of emotions in her head and heart.

"Och, Matt. Don't tease," said Elspeth.

To Mousie's consternation Matt laughed away his own suggestion.

Minutes later, soothed by levity, Matt told Elspeth that the hour was late and that he felt settled enough to sleep.

Elspeth and Matt Shearer went, separately, to bed.

Sleep might come quick to the sailorman but for the girl in the nest below the dresser there was only confusion and a night of restless dreams.

In the morning she could not meet Matt's eye. She sulked at her own shyness, said not a word – and everything on the surface was just as it had been before.

It was the night of the day upon which Randall Bontine of Balnesmoor and Ottershaw had stepped to the altar in a far-off kirk in Aberdeenshire, had taken vows of marriage and bound himself to the duty of husband to Suzanne Seaton of Piperhaugh. Though Anna had been conscious of the importance of that day in her life, she had felt less sorrow than she had anticipated, only a kind of bitterness which inured her to the occasion.

It was all so far away, Randall so far away. She told herself that she would feel pain perhaps when Randall returned with his bride and she glimpsed them together, riding in the carriage along the turnpike or coming here to Strachan Castle to visit Alicia and Mr Gilbert. But Anna was no longer convinced that her passion for Randall Bontine was unquenchable as she had once supposed it to be.

The Sinclairs, however, were more in key with the import of the day than Anna appeared to be. Catriona and her mother chattered on about 'the wedding' every time they had an opportunity. Even Sandy, who had fallen into a quiet mood since Mr Rudge's visit to Strachan, had wryly remarked that this was 'the day' and that Sir Randall would know all about it – as if he, Sandy, was an expert in the pitfalls of matrimony.

Bracken had turned sad and yellow very swiftly that season and the hills were not brave with autumn colours but tawdry and leaves from gardens and parks were too wet to whirl in the stiffening wind and coated the grass like paper scraps. Darkness came early. When milking was finished and the cows packed out into the quagmires of the pastures again, Anna wanted only to be indoors by the glow of the fire in the kitchen for the dusk was far, far too melancholy for her present mood. Once she was indoors, however, and had dried her feet and legs and changed her stockings, helped herself to a bowl of broth from the pot and had taken Robbie on to her knee to give him his supper, then she found that she hardly thought of Randall at all and that her ability to visualise the laird and his bride preparing for nuptials had quite waned away.

Even Catriona and Aileen Sinclair could not stir it to life again. It was Sandy who eventually found their remarks annoyingly suggestive and growled at them to find another topic for the supper table since he'd heard enough about bloody Randall Bontine for one damned day.

"La-de-dah!" Cat smirked. "Are ye jealous, then, Sandy? Would ye like t' be the lairdie tonight, eh?"

Even for Aileen, though, that was too pointed a remark and she advised her daughter to be more ladylike or she would get her ears boxed as she used to when she was a bairn.

Anna had heard so much of this bickering, endured so many trivial quarrels between the Sinclairs that the subject of it all hardly seemed to matter. She blotted it out. She thought instead of Robert Rudge and what sort of wedding feast convention would allow to a woman who had been divorced. Would she have a fine, bright, cheerful day for it, and rose petals on her path and scattered on her bed? She thought of Robert Rudge as lover – until Robbie clamoured for her attention and she took him away from the kitchen to play for a half-hour in the dining-room since the master was away and there was nobody to say her nay.

She lit two candles, set up Robbie's wooden skittles and let him roll a wooden ball at them, rumbling and trundling along the floor. Aileen would not object since it was for Robbie's amusement. Anna half expected that Sandy would come to join them, take a turn at the skittles. But he did not. She returned to the kitchen in due course to find that Sandy had gone to his bed.

It was well after ten o'clock, the castle as dark and as silent as such a decrepit building ever got, before Anna discovered that Sandy had not been in bed but had been down in the cellar with the ale keg for company. He had had, by the look of him, a fine time to himself, making free with Mr Gibbie's brew. She had not imagined it of Sandy. It made him seem a true brother to her husband, Matt.

Robbie was asleep in his cot. Anna had taken a bone comb from her box and, seated on the side of her bed, combed her hair, not because she was particularly neat but because it gave her sensual satisfaction, like a tabby washing its fur.

She had a candle in a little brown knobbed glass, a mirror in a wooden frame propped against the wall and, studying her face while she stroked and caressed her dark hair across her shoulders, she wondered at the changes in her and why they were not, that she could see, reflected in her outward appearance. She looked beautiful – she thought – and mysterious, too luxurious for a niche in a servants' corridor. She was unmarked by the disasters that had dogged her, by childbearing, and did not look weary and sallow and worn like a wife.

The comb whispered reassuringly in her hair. She gave a little sigh that changed into a suppressed gasp as Sandy's visage appeared beside her own, edging it out of the looking-glass, and consumed the candlelight with his shadow. She had not heard him come. She had been so absorbed in her own thoughts that he had stolen to the bedside as soundlessly as a sneak-thief.

She let the mirror drop to the bolster and turned to him. She could smell drink on him. The resemblance to Matt was apparent.

He wiped his mouth with his hand.

"Makin' yoursel' beautiful, Anna, are ye?" he whispered.

"How much have you taken?"

"A taste here, a taste there." Sandy shrugged.

He seated himself by her.

She might have supposed that he had come to offer her comfort if it had not been for his condition. He was half unclad, wore only his breeks. The rope at the girdle was loose. He was handsome now. His boyish quality had gone this past month or two, most of his daft innocence. He was as handsome as Matt had been when she had stolen him from Elspeth – only Elspeth had not wanted him after all and her efforts had led to nothing but grief and pain.

Sandy was unsmiling.

Anna touched the candle glass with her finger, shifting it so that she could look into his blue eyes and read the extent of his drunkenness. He was not out of reason, not blistered with spirits as she had feared. He seemed sharper, though, edged, and spoke in a low, distinct voice as firm as his father's had once been.

"I'm told there's no hope for me, Anna," he began, without preamble. "Marriage between us will always be impossible."

"We both know it."

"But love is not."

"Sandy, I'm promised."

"To Rudge, is it?"

"It was me, not Mr Gibbie, he came t' see."

"I'm not blind, Anna. But he came t' take a look at me too."

"You?"

"Just t' see if you're cheatin' him."

"How can you say such a thing?" Anna protested.

"Rudge expects loyalty. Expects purity. Is that no' a joke?"

"Mr Rudge is a gentleman."

"I know fine what Rudge is," said Sandy.

Candlelight and the confinement of the niche made Sandy seem less threatening. He did not smell sour as Matt had done when he was in his boozing cups. On Sandy the odour of spirits was clean and masculine. His chest and torso were muscular and his breastbone downed with coarse fair hair. Anna wondered how he could have grown into manhood without her being more aware of it.

"Go away back t' your own bed, Sandy."

He shook his head. "I'm named after old Sir Gibbie's brother; did y' know that?"

"No, I did not."

"My father worshipped the Bontines. When I was born he didn't have the impudence t' name me Gilbert so he picked the next best name."

Anna frowned. Was this, after all, just tipsy talk?

She said, "Who gave Matt *his* name?"

"The oldest o' the Bontines; Matthew. He was heritor before old Gibbie. He died young, though. My father remembered him an' thought he was a hero."

"You're named Alexander – after the Irishman?"

"An' stuck wi' it."

"Why – what does it have t' do wi' me, Sandy?"

"Nothin' of consequence," said Sandy.

He hesitated, frankly staring at her breasts. He reached and placed his hand upon her and, when she did not slap him away, reached again and drew down the collar of her shift.

Anna crushed her thighs together. She sank back an inch or two until her head rested against the wall. She was drenched with perspiration. It had been many, many months since she had been with a man, with Randall, and she had desired the pleasure of it too often to reject Sandy out of hand.

She closed her eyes.

Not so many weeks ago she had almost fallen in love with him. Now he was with her, his hands brushing her breasts, his mouth touching her flesh. She responded in spite of herself. She arched her spine and thrust herself to him, offering more. When he caught her around the waist and dragged her down on the narrow bed Anna gave a small urgent gasp and spread out her arms.

"No," she murmured. "No, please, no."

Struggling against instinct, she strove to reason with her instincts. If she yielded to him now she would become his for ever, a prisoner of the man and of the place. With vivid clarity she saw how it would evolve, how Sandy would make use of her and how pride in his conquest of her would change him, cause him to flout and defy his father, his mother and the society's conventions. She might become his woman but never his wife.

She put her knee beneath him and heaved him from her. At the same instant she wanted to comfort him, kiss and caress and hug him to her but she did not dare. She had learned from marriage to Matt and from the things that she had done with Randall that loving was not love, that real love was quick and slippery as mercury in a dish. Deep in her heart she knew that she was not cruel enough to spoil Sandy too.

He came at her again. She struck out at him. He caught her arm, held it, but sought no further intimacy. He looked down at her bared breasts, knees and thighs bare under the rucked shift and at the tears in her dark eyes. Abruptly he flung her arm from him and sat back, crouched on his haunches on the floor, his face level with her own.

"Am I no' good enough for the likes o' you, is that it?"

She swallowed her tears, let no tremor into her voice.

Deliberately she pulled up her shift to cover her breasts and brought her hair down over her shoulders.

"I would do you no good, Sandy," she said.

"I wouldna cast you aside."

"I'm promised to Mr Rudge."

"Christ!" Sandy hissed. "Is it only that sham promise that prevents you?"

"It's no sham," said Anna, with a prickle of anger. "I have it in writin'."

Sandy got to his feet. He hitched his breeks against his waist and stared down at her, despising her.

"Aye, sham," Sandy declared. "You that's such a schemer, Anna, I'm amazed you canna see what Rudge is up to."

Heat and desire had gone out of her. She was relieved by a sudden wave of curiosity. Swinging her feet to the floor she grabbed Sandy by the wrist; he might otherwise leave her [redacted]ppeased.

"What do y' mean?" Anna demanded. "What's Robert up to?"

"Rudge only wants the mill at Kennart. An' you're his one hope for obtainin' it," Sandy answered.

"Kennart mill? Me?"

"When your sister returns to claim her rightful due then your famous Mr Rudge'll be given his marchin' orders."

"Why should that be?"

"For skinnin' silver from the purse."

Anna saw it all with astonishing clarity. Now that it had been brought to her attention she realised that she would, in fact, have been surprised if Mr Rudge had *not* taken the chance to peel a few pounds from the mill purse while Jamie Moodie was ill. It was obvious that the lawyer mannie, Hildebrand, had learned of the theft and would recommend that Elspeth dismiss the manager as soon as she returned to Balnesmoor.

It was all so clear, so brilliantly clear.

If Mr Rudge was married to her, to Elspeth's sister, his position at Kennart would be secure for life.

Anna laughed aloud.

She saw Sandy's eyes widen.

Aye, she had been correct in her judgement. Sandy Sinclair was too innocent ever to be her man. As wife, as lover she would soon have warped him out of honest shape and brought him only ill luck and unhappiness.

Sandy stammered, "D . . . did ye know? D . . . did Rudge say as much?"

"Kennart mill's my bridal price," said Anna evenly. "Did you suppose, Sandy, a bachelor like Mr Rudge would take a wife otherwise?"

"Good God Almighty!" Sandy exclaimed. "You're worse than he is."

"Aye, that might be true," said Anna.

She felt oddly flattered by the insult, quite warmed by it in fact.

"What – what if Elspeth does not come back?" said Sandy.

"In that case Mr Rudge will marry me for other reasons."

"Phaaah!" said Sandy in disgust. He tore his hand from her grasp. "You're two o' a kind. Both devils."

He stamped away up the corridor, muttering, all his ardour, his youthful passion diminished and spent.

Anna heard the clink of a bottle against a tankard and imagined him, in the kitchen, taking a long swill of whisky or ale to cleanse the unpalatable truth from his mind.

It would take more than liquor to make Sandy understand. Surely, though, he would eventually realise that she was not for the likes of him, law or no law.

Anna sat musing on the side of the cot for a while then reached below the cot and fished out her box. From it she lifted a tub of coal-black ink and a feather quill, a tablet of smooth paper, all of which items she had removed from Mr Gibbie's chamber under the turret stairs and which she was sure he would never misss.

She balanced the tablet on her knee, tucking it against her stomach with her forearm as if it was a school slate. Stooping, she dipped the cut of the quill into the ink and let it drip for a moment, then, making up in patience what she lacked in skill, she penned the date upon the upper portion of the page.

She watched the black ink dry.

She wrote: *"My Deerest Robert."*

She sucked the feather for inspiration and then, piece by piece, completed the letter: *"I long to see you agin. I wish to convers with you at your erliest conven'ce. It w'ld be sutable for you to call on* *me on Wes'day 1st. I will eckspec you for your dinner. With All My Afekton and My Respek, I Am Your Anna."*

Tomorrow morning, first thing, she would walk with the letter to the mail office and on Wednesday, when Robert came, she would inform him that she had made up her mind, that she would have him for a husband and would settle terms for the marriage with or without her sister's blessing, with or without Elspeth's return.

NINE

Sisters in Sorrow

Keir Bolderon's courtship of Elspeth Patterson was a good deal more subtle than Robert Rudge's wooing of the heiress's sister. Throughout the autumn months, while poor old Snippets languished under Doctor Kidson's ministrations and was bled with increasing frequency, Keir Bolderon's unlikely friendship with Elspeth ripened and changed in character.

It was astonishing just how quickly and how thoroughly Mrs Patterson acquired that air of 'apartness', a certain brusqueness of speech and manner, that separated her from labouring colliers. It was not the power of the post of paymaster that effected the change but rather the suitability of the person, woman or man, for the post. To do it at all demanded a degree of intellectual fibre that Elspeth Patterson had always possessed or, in the course of her secret life as wife to the wealthy Moodie, had adopted as a means of keeping up with her husband.

It was an easy matter for Mr Bolderon to defend himself against the ribald remarks and aspersions that were cast in his direction by fellow engineers and companions in management who were all agog at the notion that a female could do anything as demanding as make up wages and accurately keep books. What intrigued them was the prospect of having such a radical appointment accepted by their own crews, in being at liberty to select some sweet young thing from out of the ranks and, by paying her a few shillings, protect her from the brutalising effects of coal-labour and, at the same time, save themselves money. None, however, had the audacity to try it. None had found a girl capable of it. In consequence they chinned old Bolderon at every opportunity and gave him gyp at monthly meetings of the Coal Owners and Managers Association in the Peveril Tavern in Alloa. Keir Bolderon took it all in good part. He was evasive about the woman, offhand, in fact. If he had gotten on to his high horse, been all kirk and county about it, he would have taken more stick than he got and might have roused the curiosity of his fellows as to the natural attributes of this female phenomenon, brought them riding out to the Abbeyfield not to admire the nice new winding-rope or grimace at the primitive methods still in general use but to squint at and appraise the female paymaster and perhaps try to steal her away.

Closer to home only Thomas Rance was often enough in the company of both Mr Bolderon and Mrs Patterson to observe the flowering of respect and affection between them and to puzzle over it.

Thomas Rance was not, of course, so unworldly as to ignore Keir Bolderon's probable motive. Mrs Patterson was a fine-looking woman, neat about her person, well-spoken and well-educated. She was also attractive to a man in a more earthy, honest sort of way, and it was on the level of a collier that Thomas Rance pitched his judgement of the manager's intentions. Thomas Rance found the nosegays of garden flowers that would appear in a glass dish on the counting-house table rather hard to stomach, found the Frenchified habit of making a 'pic-nic' out of the midday meal went against the grain of his gruff temperament. Indeed, most of Mr Bolderon's little 'attentions' to Mrs Patterson seemed ridiculously out of place in the middle of a coalfield. But the woman herself was more sensible than her employer. She would drift along with Mr Bolderon's games only so far, would then brush aside the candy talk, sweep away the wine glasses, china bowls and lace-edged teacloth and say, "Time we got on with the work, Mr Bolderon, is it not?"; to which question Mr Bolderon would answer with a reluctant nod and pretend, suddenly, to be very busy indeed.

The tenor and circumstances of life on the Abbeyfield did not suit such a genteel wooing. In late August a slump of rock in the main tunnel mutilated a boy and a woman. Thomas Rance led the crew that dug them out. Mr Bolderon carried the writhing victims to the counting-house where rudimentary doctoring was administered until Doctor Kidson could arrive on the scene. There was blood in profusion, screaming, a crowd of wailing relatives gathered about the pallets on which the woman, a mother of seven children, was held down, and the boy, youngest of three, sunk into a torpor and died there on the floor below the high desk where men, come Saturday, would make their marks and take their money. Mr Bolderon tried to hasten Elspeth away from the scene but she was stern and purposeful and, with lips pursed, got to her knees with clean water and a swab and bathed the boy's crushed head, cooled it and crooned to him until his mother took over the task. Only when the boy, a lad of no more than ten, gave up the ghost with a strange little purr in his throat, did Elspeth Patterson step back and find a quiet corner in which she could shed her tears.

In September a coal-oil lamp burst and scalded two haulers, blinding one. Again it was Mrs Patterson who offered comfort until the family could be drawn from the pit and brought to the offices to lead the women away since they were capable of walking, albeit in agonising pain. In September too, coal-hewer James Caldwell expired of natural causes in the base-level seam that ran west from the ladder bottom. Mr Bolderon had gone down to examine the corpse and had supervised its removal to the carpenters' shed where it would lie under a blanket until coffined for burial. On that occasion it was Keir Bolderon who had bowed and shed tears for the dead man whom he had not known well, though not in sight of his oversman or Mrs Patterson but up on the path behind the fences hidden by a drape of yellow and russet leaves.

Next afternoon there was a basket of roast lamb and a jar of pears stewed in burgundy and a fresh lace-edged cloth to keep grease off the table; and Mr Bolderon and Mrs Patterson had wasted an hour in eating, talking and talking all the while on matters more solemn, that day, than gay.

Bewildered by it all, Thomas Rance shook his head and left them to it. He could not fathom what a sensible and educated widow could see in a man like Keir Bolderon who, according to talk, would be out of employment and without a penny to his name come Easter.

Airs, graces and drawing-room manners were not for Mr Rance for, at last, he had forgotten what it felt like to be falling in love.

* * *

Early that morning Matt inadvertently brought down a huge rib of coal. Caught off guard by the size of the fall he feared that the rumble would be heard not only by the Ogilvies but by hewers near the ladder. Mouse – Sarah close on her heels – was in the narrow tunnel when the noise enveloped her. She wriggled forward to the trap at once and, receiving Matt's assurance that he was uninjured, crawled past her sister to bawl out that all was fine with the Bennets and there was no cause for alarm.

The rib had peeled from a long section of coal that stretched to the nether end of the slit. For the first time the millstone slab was exposed. Curiously, Matt examined it by candlelight, followed it to the cave's narrowest part. Here, space was so tight that he had to suck in breath and scrape chest and belly on the wall. Mouse scowled through the trap and only when the dust had cleared came down the worn steps to fill the creel with coal to push up to Sarah who in turn would pack the sleds.

Matt said, "God, but there's more."

Mouse glanced at him.

"It wends on under the slab."

"What?"

"It's no splinter this, Mousie. Did your daddy ever explore the high end?"

"I dinna think so, Matt."

Matt rubbed the millstone with his thumb and dislodged even by that light pressure a few glittering grains. He strove to stretch the candle further into the crack but could not and, with much grunting, extracted himself and came out.

Kneeling by the coal pile on the floor, hands idle, Mouse continued to watch him.

Matt put the candle on a ledge, pointed a finger at the girl "I could've swore I heard you speak, Mousie."

"It was a question had t' be answered."

"Even so," said Matt, "it's a start."

He stood close to her, drawers plastered to his loins, showing the man-shape. He saw where she was looking and turned away, hitching his cloth in embarrassment.

Over his shoulder he said, "I'll ask y' another question then:

if I could break down enough o' that slab, Mousie, could you wriggle in there wi' a candle an' see what's to be seen?"

She glanced from Matt to the shadowy region where walls and ceiling converged.

"Aye, I could."

"I'd make sure ye didn't get stuck," Matt said.

"Will the slab break easy?"

"Nah, I doubt it," said Matt. "It may not yield at all."

"Break out the coal, then," Mousie said. "Make a hole for me on the high side."

"It'll be damned narrow."

She gave a little snort. "Aye, but I'm damned wee, am I not?"

Matt squatted, facing across the column of unbroken coal. She did not meet his eye. She busied herself packing lumps into the creel. Above them Sarah rested her elbows on the rim of the trap and peered at the couple.

Matt said, "I'm no collier, Mousie, so tell me what y' think. Will there be a complete seam through there?"

"Might be."

"Who would know?"

"Rance." She looked up. "But we're no' tellin' *him* about it."

"Would Davy know?"

"He might. Let me go in an' see."

"Aye," said Matt. "Seein's one thing but reachin' is another. Look, I canna excavate, Mousie. It would take a full crew o' men to break safe through the slab t' what lies beyond."

"What are you sayin'?"

"I'm sayin' it's too much for me."

"Daddy could've done it."

"Nah, nah. Your daddy, fine man wi' pick an' wedge though he was, would have baulked at this job too, Mousie."

"So you'll give up our pickin's, will ye?"

She got to her feet, lumps of coal dropping from each hand. Matt would not let her go, however. He put his arm about her waist and drew her over the coal, pinning her against him.

"Stop it, Mouse," he commanded. "Stop it."

She went slack against him. No man had ever held her so tightly before. It turned her legs to jelly just to feel Matt's arms about her.

Matt said, "We'll look before we act, Mouse. I'll do what I can t' knock out crawl space. But, I warn you, if the slab locks off a complete seam then it can be a secret no longer."

She lay against his shoulder, breathing raggedly.

Matt gave her a gentle little shake. "Do y' hear me, Mouse?"

"Aye, Matt," she murmured.

Hector Fotheringham was more astringent than he had ever been before. He did not tell his manager in so many words that the problem of investment had been solved. He indicated in general terms, with that aristocratic vagueness which Keir Bolderon found so infuriating, that surveyors would be taking over in early summer of the coming year. He was not vague, however, when informing the manager that he blamed him for lack of enterprise, considered him something less than the expert he professed to be.

Keir Bolderon did not bother to defend himself. He did not even pursue the line that might have led to an admission by the owner that he had borrowed money from the Falkirk banker. Keir Bolderon had a contract. He needed every last day of the contract to conduct a proper courtship of Elspeth Patterson, to marry her, lay his hands on her wealth and negotiate by purchase a share in the Abbeyfield. It no longer mattered that the situation had deteriorated. Experts notwithstanding, new winnings might not exist and any sort of a contract might, in a year or two, be worth less than the paper it was written on. Somebody – not the lovely Hector, of course – might be throwing good money after bad, and he might be squandering his future to no avail. Blinded by Fotheringham's shabby treatment, Keir Bolderon played the game to the hilt in the fond belief that he might yet run out a winner if only he could catch Mrs Patterson before Moodie's sisters found her or had her declared dead. Time was, to a degree, on his side. He was not, however, elated to receive Olivia Melrose's invitation to 'take supper' at her residence in Hanover Street.

Not so long since, Keir Bolderon's entire week would have been lit bright by the prospect of a rendezvous with the handsome widow. Now, though, he found that the attraction had been but skin deep. All the things he had recently admired had become detestable vanities. Olivia Melrose might affect the manners of a lady but she was no better, really, than he was.

Nonetheless Keir Bolderon journeyed to Edinburgh. He paid a call on Neil McNeil; no walks with the old man now. McNeil greeted Bolderon from the depths of an ancient sedan chair stood before a blazing fire in a room at the back of the warehouse. Sons, grandsons and nephews were much in evidence, giving the visitor the eye, heads cocked like scavenging crows waiting for a ram to die. Not only had McNeil's legs given out but his shrewd brain seemed foggy too. Mr Bolderon stayed only five or six minutes in the trader's company then went away saddened by the sight of such ruin.

In this mood he reached Hanover Street. He was duly admitted to the parlour and greeted by the effusive Olivia Melrose, or, as he thought of her now, Lizzie Moodie. Beneath the silken gown and whispering petticoats, beneath stockings and slippers, under the pearl-decked diadem, Keir Bolderon saw the ghost of a dreary, half-starved lass from Ba'nesmoor. All her chatter about Edinburgh society's wits and wizards seemed false, sheer affectation. Keir Bolderon knew only too well how the change in his attitude to Mrs Melrose had come about. In his heart he was Mrs Patterson's man, her gallant and knightly defender. Mrs Melrose was their enemy.

Seasoned by years of hypocrisy, however, Keir Bolderon managed to seem as affable as ever. He could not fire himself with ardour, though. Not even frequent glimpses of the smooth, heavy orbs in the bosom of Mrs Melrose's gown could fire his former interest in the widow.

Mrs Melrose seemed unaware that her suitor had 'gone elsewhere'. She was less reserved than before and at once started to share secrets with him, to discuss matters of family business as if he was a friend of many years' standing.

He was told, without having to ask, that Janet had gone home to Dundee to attend her daughter-in-law's lying-in but that she would return to Edinburgh before the November session and that a certain Mr Augustine – no relation to the saint – had agreed to challenge the will and to promote the sisters' cause in the Scottish court.

"Is Mr Augustine – optimistic?"

"Indeed. He believes that Janet an' I have justice on our side."

Keir Bolderon's concept of justice had changed along with his feelings towards Olivia Melrose. He put a handful of questions to her, sufficient to ascertain that the Moodie sisters were no closer to wresting the weaver's fortune from its rightful owner, Elspeth, than ever. Mr Augustine – emphatically no saint – was patently a plausible rogue set on soaking them for months to come. Keir Bolderon did not advance this opinion but allowed Mrs Melrose to chatter away to her heart's content. He hardly heard Mrs Melrose's voice, listened with no more than half an ear to her complaints, to the dismal harangue against her brother and his eccentricities. He was thinking of Elspeth Patterson, of her beauty, her personable habits, her warmth.

Keir Bolderon started as Mrs Melrose transferred herself, quite without warning, from her little tub chair to the sofa by his side. She touched his arm, took his hand. The move was totally unexpected, unprovoked. He glanced towards the closed door of the room, willing the housekeeper or damned schoolmaster or *somebody* to intrude, to save him from embarrassment. The desire that had once been in him had turned to revulsion. It was all he could do not to leap to his feet with a cry.

"Is there somethin' wrong, Mr Bolderon?"

"No. No, Madam. I—I fear only that—"

"I need a man's strength now," the woman said. "I need the comfort an' consolation of an arm about me, a shoulder to lean upon, in a literal sense, not merely metaphorically."

Keir Bolderon swallowed. Her breasts were fully displayed in the neck of the dress. He could see the puckering of flesh as she leaned towards him and tried to lay her cheek against his neck.

He felt a strong desire to shout, "Too late, Madam. Too late. I have found what I want elsewhere," but managed to control the impulse and, suppressing a shudder, patted her soothingly upon the shoulder.

"My servants are discreet," she whispered.

Good God in Heaven! He was being seduced. She believed that by taking him to her bed she could bind him to her. He saw why she had swung in the wind towards favouring a rough-mannered engineer. She assumed that he would fight for her rights like a husband and lift her again to some new plane of achievement. How could he tell her that she was too old for such tricks and that he had found, among other things, a conscience?

Awkwardly he disentangled himself.

She was disappointed and bewildered.

"Have I offended you, Mr Bolderon?"

"Not in the least, Mrs Melrose."

"Why then do you wish to leave?"

"Because the hour is late an' I have to be up an' about at an ungodly hour tomorrow morning."

"On business?"

"Aye, Madam. Coalpit business."

"Would you not, Mr Bolderon, prefer to be about business of another sort?"

She had not quite given up on him.

Perhaps if he had not met the sister Janet, had not been privy to their machinations – which he regarded as immoral, unethical and unwarranted – he might have succumbed to her blandishments. But he was a man of principle and in love with another.

Olivia Melrose did not want a lover or a husband. She wanted a clerk, a secretary and somebody to wage war on her behalf with the laws of the land. He was a manager of men, an engineer, not a lap-dog to the petty bourgeoisie.

Elspeth would not behave thus. Elspeth would not try to wheedle him into wasting his time and talent on squeezing the law for all it was worth.

Olivia Melrose wanted an answer.

He pushed himself from her, got resolutely to his feet.

He said, "I feel that I should inform you, dear Mrs Melrose, that my connection with the Abbeyfield will terminate in ten months' time. It seems that Mr Fotheringham has found another investor."

Obviously Mrs Melrose had expected something more intimate; shyness, not pragmatism. Really, he supposed, she did not give a farthing for his enterprise. Had she ever understood his predicament? He wondered if it was the hard hand of sister Janet that had thrust Olivia Moodie Melrose into his arms.

"I have an income that requires –" said Olivia Melrose.

"Management?" said Keir Bolderon.

"I do not understand what you mean by that word in this context, sir," said Mrs Melrose who, whatever her faults, was not so insensitive as to withstand such an obvious rebuff.

"No matter," said Keir Bolderon.

For a mad moment he longed to tell her that he could end all her concern, her fretting over the acquisition of money that she did not need and which did not belong to her. James Moodie's fortune would not compensate the Moodie sisters for the sufferings of their early years, the years of struggle and discipline that had fashioned them, that had made them what they were. They could not buy back their innocence any more than he could buy respectability.

He might say, "I know where she is, the heiress."

He might say, "Taking me for a husband is pointless."

He might say, "You and I, Mrs Melrose, are out of the same box."

In his mind, like echoes of thunder, rumbled memories of his own boyhood.

Olivia Melrose started. Her hands worked at the skirt of her gown, drawing it down and down as if he had somehow caught her in an immodest pose. Did she read the truth in his eyes? Did she, of all people, see in him the sorrow of a man who cannot grasp what he has claimed, who is finally victim of a decency he had sought to discard?

Keir Bolderon said, "I'm not for you, Mrs Melrose."

"Stay, though – for a while at least."

"I cannot."

"Why have you changed, Mr Bolderon?"

"I cannot explain it."

"Is it because you've discovered my secret?"

"Aye." It was the simplest answer he could give even if it was not quite true. "Aye."

He was relieved by her anger. She rose like a cloud, all dark and swarming, and struck him a blow across the mouth with the flat of her hand.

Keir Bolderon felt a spot of warm blood on the inside of his lip. He sucked at it while the heat of her fingers spread across his cheek.

"I thought you liked me," she said, already regretting her outburst. "I thought you were a suitor for my hand."

"I wanted only your money."

"In spite – no matter what – you may still have that."

"Only your money, Madam," said Keir Bolderon quite deliberately, "not you."

"Get out," she cried. "Leave my house. Leave me alone."

She reached for the bell on the table but Mr Bolderon needed no servant to eject him. He gave her a bow, rueful and polite to the very last, then, without apology, turned on his heel and left.

Occasionally on warm nights close to dusk Matt Shearer would take himself down to the river's edge, peel off his clothes and walk naked into the water. He would turn on to his back, kick up spray with his feet, thrashing thus for three or four minutes, then would find bottom again and emerge dripping and startlingly clean to rub himself dry on a cloth.

The colliers who observed Shearer's ablutions thought him daft and wondered that he did not catch his death and die. They washed themselves indoors in tubs, basins and buckets and would not have dreamed of bathing in the Forth.

With the coming of the autumn, however, Matt found the shore too dark and lonely after shift and took to the more conventional method of ridding his body of its coating of dirt.

He demanded no more than a blazing fire and a cauldron of hot water with which to fill the bottom of the round wooden tub into which, comically, he somehow squeezed himself. Because the lassies were not kin he had strung another curtain of washed burlap across another corner of the kitchen and would lug the tub behind it and bathe in comparative privacy.

Mouse alone would keek at the curtain. She would see the bulges and bumps that Matt's elbows, knees and buttocks made and would glower at this novelty and tell herself that she disapproved and that Daddy would never have done it, that the old way of skimming off black grime with a wet towel was the best way for a man. Mouse never undressed. On occasions she would quickly slip out of her shift and slip on another but she was ashamed of her body and drew a very fine line between practicality and modesty.

As was usually the case these days Elspeth had not returned from work at the counting-house. Elginbrod would be late up with the tally and Elspeth was obliged to bide until the clerk presented her with his daily totals which she would then record in the coal log and the ledgers. It was meticulous work and Elginbrod's pages were invariably grubby and blurred and difficult to decipher which took more time and made her later home than ever.

Sarah would prepare food or finish off the cooking that Davy had seen fit to start that afternoon and often supper would be eaten and Mary Jean would be fed before Elspeth returned. It was not an arrangement that any of them found particularly comfortable. But there was the consolation of money for, with Elspeth's twenty shillings added to Matt's take, the family were in clover.

While Davy and Sarah skiddled with pots about the hearth Matt took his bath. The simmering cauldron, which had had pride of place upon the fire, had drawn heat from the cooking-pots and created a fog of condensation in the small kitchen. With dirty clothing flung about the place was horrid and cluttered to such a degree that even Mouse sought out a private corner and Mary Jean retired, girning, to her bed to prattle and complain to her rag-doll until Mam came home to give her attention.

Matt had been behind the curtain for three or four minutes before he called out, "Davy, will ye bring me yon bar o' soap?"

Davy answered, "Get it yoursel'," for Davy had not, after all, forgiven Matt for his betrayal. "I'm no' your bloody servant."

"Davy, for God's sake!" Matt elbowed back the curtain and gesticulated to the boy. But Davy was stooped over a pan sizzling with pork fat and dared not, even if he had wished, release his hold on the iron handle lest the four pieces of meat slither into the fire and be lost.

From her seat on the edge of the bed, Mouse said, "What soap?"

"There, wi' the towel." Matt's thick, pale arm jutted from the curtain. "Aye, that's a good lass."

Mouse lifted the wedge of soap and picked her way through the litter. Matt's hand opened to take the stuff but the girl did not give it to him. Instead she insinuated herself behind the curtain and, leaning over his big naked back, dropped the soap with a plop into the suds in his lap.

"God, Matt Shearer, but you're mucky!"

"Scrub m' back, then," said Matt, amused.

Tentatively she touched her fingertips to the flange of muscle that covered his shoulder-blade, then she flattened her tiny, calloused palm against his flesh and rubbed it in a circular motion.

"Mousie!" Davy was alarmed. "Mouse, come awa' out o' there."

"I'm only scrubbin' Matt's back."

"Come out, damn you, when you're told."

"I used t' do it for Daddy."

"Aye, when y' were wee."

"I'm still wee," said Mousie.

"Davy," said Sarah, matter-of-factly, "attend t' the meat."

Scummy black water made a kilt for Matt's loins. His long legs hung out of the tub, almost touching the door. He leaned forward and arched his spine to cover his private parts as the girl slid water over him and, using her hand like a spatula, skimmed grime from his body. He fished for, found and gave her the soap. She smeared it across him, working upwards, not daring to turn her chore into a caress.

Neither of them spoke.

"Take this bloody pan, Sarah," Davy shouted, "till I see what's goin' on."

"In a minute, Davy."

Mouse leaned on Matt, hands laving suds across his collarbones, the column of his neck, down to his chest. Matt stiffened in a bowed position. Hair brushed his earlobe, made him shiver. Mouse was breathing with her mouth open as if the work was hard. She put her breasts against him so that her dress became wet and slithery too. She was so intent on cleaning him that she seemed oblivious to anything other than the job on hand.

Matt stopped her.

"That's – that's enough, Mousie."

The pan clinked as Davy edged it to the stones and a tidal wash of reeking fat crackled and spat and spilled.

"You'll fire it, Davy," Sarah cried. "Hold it up."

Matt put his hand about Mouse's wrist and pinned it against his chest. Her face was against his neck, her mouth by his ear, hair tickling and brushing his cheek. Her breasts were soft against his spine.

"No, Allison," he whispered.

She pushed away abruptly and drew back the curtain just as Davy wrenched his pan from the hearth.

In her corner Mary Jean was watching, the rag-doll rocked in the crook of one arm as if it was a babby. Mary Jean had stopped girning. She sensed tension even if she did not understand it. She kept her eyes fixed on Davy and the cooking-pan for the spoiling of supper had precedent and was a disaster whose import she could grasp.

Davy's agitation found no outlet. Mouse emerged from behind the burlap before he could react. She was wet about the chest and arms, hair clung damply to her cheeks. She looked directly at her brother, smugly plucked the worn grey towel from the bed and returned with it, four or five steps past the table, and hung it like a cloak across Matt's shoulders.

"There!" she said. "See!"

Blue smoke rose from the frying-pan. Torn between Mouse and saving the supper Davy twisted, knelt and did his best to rescue the meat by laving it with fat before drawing the pan away from the heat of the coals. Globules hopped out and burned his wrist. He clanked the pan down, sucked the scald and glowered as Mouse, quite unconcerned, glided to the dresser and took out a dry garment, glided to Elspeth's corner and snapped shut the curtain there.

Matt clambered noisily from the tub. Davy's fears were lost in fussing with supper, with drying and dressing, with Elspeth's return.

Nothing was said, no remark made. From that moment of intimacy, however, came a change in little Mouse Bennet who, without Matt, would be again lost – and this time for ever.

Elspeth glanced up from her writing and, in dismay, saw Snippets Smith standing in the doorway of the counting-house.

It was a quiet morning, disturbed only by the cacophony of the winding-gear. Henning had gone below to sort out an argument about the tally and McCaffray had been despatched to Alloa to take delivery of a sealed letter from Mr McNeil, payment, less all the merchant's discounts, for August coal shipments.

Snippets had shrunk. His cheekbones were like rivets, his eyes sunken. He leaned for support on an ash stick while he balefully observed the female phenomenon seated at *his* desk with *his* ledger open before her.

Elspeth got to her feet.

"Mr Smith," she said. "It's grand t' see you out an' about once more. I trust it'll not be long before you're back at your place?"

The paymaster did not answer. He picked his way across the uneven floor as if a wrong move might topple him and send him sprawling. He came to the desk, turned the ledger and inspected it in silence for two or three minutes, wetting his finger with the tip of his tongue to turn the pages.

"Neat enough," he said pedantically.

"Thank you for sayin' so, Mr Smith," said Elspeth.

He darted a glance at her to see if she intended sarcasm but found her perfectly sincere.

"Where did you learn t' account with such accuracy?"

"From my departed husband," said Elspeth.

Snippets made no comment but it seemed to Elspeth that he did not swallow the lie. She could hardly confess that she had, on occasions, kept the clothbook for her real husband, James Simpson Moodie, who was by no means dead.

"He taught ye well."

"Are you," said Elspeth, "intending t' return before the next paying out, Mr Smith?"

He gave a little sniff, as if checking a tear of regret, and said, "I'm in need o' the wage, Mrs Patterson, or I would not be returnin' at all."

He still had not told her when he intended to resume his duties, to oust her from her warm, dry billet and send her back down the shaft.

"Is your health so broken then?" said Elspeth.

Again he did not answer her. He said, "Mr Bolderon has been t' talk with me. I'm to take you on as my deputy. At least Mr Bolderon did me the honour of askin' if I would inspect your work an' approve it before I gave my agreement."

"You do not approve of women in the counting-house, do you, Mr Smith?"

"No, Mrs Patterson, I do not. Money should be handled by persons of responsibility an' sound sense, qualities that are rarely found in females. A woman canna control her brain as a man can."

Elspeth said, "Be that as it may, Mr Smith, I doubt if you'll find error in my countin'."

"Mr Bolderon has kept an eye on you, no doubt."

"I do not require t' be supervised, Mr Smith. For your information I do not find this work particularly taxin' – even with an 'uncontrolled brain'."

Snippets Smith tapped the ash stick upon the floor, showing his impatience and his annoyance at the fact that she had spoken back to him. She should have been meek, apologetic, in awe of him. It was not that Snippets doubted her skill in arithmetic and with the pen; he feared that the position he had held for so many years would be devalued in the colliers' eyes by the fact that it could be done just as well by a woman.

Sourly Snippets Smith said, "I see you'll have my job, Mrs Patterson, if I should let it slip even one inch."

She hesitated. She did not want to make an outright enemy of him for she would, with luck, have to work by his side in the months ahead. She was stung by his unreasonable attitude, however, and his condescensions.

She said, "I *have* your job, Mr Smith, albeit as a temporary measure. I don't believe that the Abbeyfield has suffered because of it."

He tapped with the stick, tapped and turned on her.

"I'll be back at my post within the month, Mrs Patterson, for it is the post t' which I was appointed an' from which I've not been dismissed."

Elspeth could not resist. "Never fear, Mr Smith, I'll be here to ease the weight from your ailin' shoulders."

Another man might have seen the humour in it, have realised that there was no barb to the hook. But not Snippets Smith. He was too brittle a person, too uncertain to acknowledge

Elspeth's quickness. He made no rejoinder to her remark. He shifted about, using the stick, and shuffled towards the open door as crimped and peevish as if pain still gripped him.

Elspeth watched him go.

For a moment an apology hung in her mouth but she smothered it. Men like Snippets Smith brought out the worst in her, though Gaddy would have seen it otherwise.

She had been, she knew, injudicious. As she seated herself at the desk once more she wondered if Mr Bolderon would not finally side with the paymaster, with a man, find some menial post for her to occupy, one more in keeping with her status and her sex.

"Just let him try," she murmured and jerked the pen from its holder.

A blob of ink fell from the nib on to the ledger.

Elspeth uttered a little tut at her carelessness, blotted the stain and, with the leaf-shaped knife kept for the purpose, began to scratch it out and make the page clean again.

When the wedding celebrations were over Randall Bontine wasted no time in returning with his bride to Ottershaw. It was a busy season, time of the harvest and the gathering of cattle for the trysts. However much Randall trusted his grieve it made him uneasy to be away from the estate and he felt that three weeks was quite long enough.

Suzanne was by no means reluctant to leave the shelter of her father's house and embark swiftly upon her new life as mistress of Ottershaw. She was more in love with Randall than ever for they shared a sexual passion that had to be disguised from modest and decent relatives. Walter, perhaps, had an inkling that his old comrade in arms had made a wise choice, in more ways than one, in selecting his sister. Randall would never suffer from neglect of the playful affection that slips from the privacy of the bed-chamber into all aspects of a marriage, making the fortunate couple considerate to each other and eager for the candles to be lit and the evening to move towards night. Suzanne was certainly no dry stick. Randall was not a selfish lover, demanding without return his pleasure. The first weeks of the marriage were exhausting to both husband and wife. But in Ottershaw a certain amount of decorum was required, a code of behaviour that prohibited too frank a display of love and desire; the servants must not be 'shocked'.

It was with more rue than rile, however, that Henry Hunter caught Sir Randall and Mistress Suzanne kissing over breakfast in the dining-room. He should, of course, have knocked loudly to announce his entrance but he had somehow not expected his master to be 'bristling', as it were, at that hour of a chill autumn morning, particularly in the presence of a dish of grilled trout whose glabrous eyes stared up from the plate, dull and disapproving, like those of kirk elders.

Mistress Suzanne pulled away from her husband and fluttered the bodice of her day-dress, not meeting the gaze of the old steward.

"Beggin' your pardon, Mr Randall, but one o' the Sinclairs is in the servants' hall an' adamantly demands t' speak wi' you," Henry Hunter announced.

"Is it Lachlan?" Randall said, rising.

"No, sir, it's the laddie; Sandy."

Randall frowned slightly. "Does he carry a message from my brother? Is there illness or accident at Strachan Castle?"

"I put the same question t' him but he indicates that his business is wi' you, laird, an' does not concern Mr Gilbert."

In spite of himself, Randall glanced over his shoulder at Suzanne who sat quite meekly, as if the message meant not a thing to her. She toyed with a flake of fish upon her plate and then, as if making a momentous decision, reached for the silver pot and busied herself pouring coffee into her cup.

She had never asked her husband to explain the visit of the girl from Strachan Castle on the night of the Ottershaw ball. She had been afraid of his honesty, of how he might answer her, and realised that his visit to her bedroom that same night was not, perhaps, coincidence. Whatever Randall had done in the past, whatever hints of scandal and depravity were attached to him were none of her concern. Randall would not be the first bachelor to have sown wild oats before marriage

Randall said, "I shall come, Hunter. I'll see him in the hay yard." As the steward left he turned, said to his wife, "It seems, dearest, that the business of the day has caught up with me. With your permission, may I leave now?"

"Of course, my love." Suzanne did not rise from her place at the long table though she did look up and force a smile of reassurance. "Shall I ask cook to prepare a luncheon or will you be gone until dark?"

"I'll give my instruction to Hunter after I see what this young fellow wants," said Randall. "He is, by the way, the son of my grieve, now grieve to Gibbie. I cannot imagine what he requires at this hour."

"Trot off and see." Suzanne blew him a kiss from her fingertips, hiding her apprehension well.

Sandy Sinclair waited by the back wall of the old coach-house in that part of the stable yard where once, years ago, his brother had exercised Sir Randall's stallion, Sabre. Now, at this season, the hay crop had been dragged here to help dry it and had been stored in the long lofts above the building. The yard looked untidy and ill-groomed. Labour could not be spared just yet to make it spick and span and Sabre was too long in the tooth to require daily exercising now.

Sinclair waited by the arch at the mouth of the yard, hat nervously clutched in his hand. It gave Randall a strange feeling to see him there; the youngest Sinclair was an amalgam of both father and brother, stalwart yet truculent. His weathered face was flushed with embarrassment. Randall's apprehension increased. Sandy Sinclair was Anna's watchdog; he feared that the young man had brought bad news concerning the girl.

"Did you walk here, Sinclair?"

"I – I borrowed old Maisie, laird."

"Come then, speak your business."

"I seek employment on Ottershaw," Sandy Sinclair said.

Randall raised an eyebrow and hooked his thumb into the straps of his leather belt. Suzanne's civilising influence had not caused him to abandon working-rig for something fancy.

"You're my brother's servant, employed on Strachan. Have you been dismissed and, if that's the case, what reason is behind it?"

"I – I haven't been dismissed, sir. I come here wi'out M Gilbert's knowledge an' wi'out my father's consent. I know I should stay at the castle, sir – but I canna. I want t' come back here. Where I belong."

"Where you belong? You belong where you're put, Sinclair."

"If – if I canna come here again, sir, I'll have to attend the October hirin' fair."

"Your father will never allow it."

"I'm my own man, Laird Bontine."

"Why do you want away from Strachan? The truth, now."

"I'm not settled there. I never will be."

Randall hesitated. "Look at me, Sinclair."

Sandy obeyed. "Aye, sir."

"Is it her?" Randall said.

"It is, sir," Sandy answered.

"Do you want her?"

"Aye, sir. I do."

"But she will not permit you liberties, is that it?"

"We can never marry."

"Oh, so it's *marriage* you want," said Randall. "No, that can never be."

"I'm in a torment, laird."

"If you find another lass to make into a wife," Randall said, "your torment will vanish."

"I want no other girl, sir, at least none I've met so far."

"Why did you not make your request to my brother? That would have been the proper and correct method."

"Mr Gilbert would not understand, sir."

Randall's eyes narrowed. "Do you think I will?"

"If not you, Sir Randall, who will?"

From the brother, from Matt, the question would have been rank impertinence but Sandy Sinclair was too innocent and honest by half.

Randall said, "I can't order my brother to release a servant."

"But you could ask him, sir," said Sandy.

Asking, of course, would be enough. Servants and tenants were fully aware that Gibbie still danced to the laird's tune and always would, unless Gibbie brought his ship home and made his fortune independently of the Ottershaw name.

"I could, indeed, 'ask' him," Randall said. "But he may not grant your request, Sinclair. Certainly your father will resist."

"It's that, sir, or seek another master."

"I would not want to see you lost, Sinclair."

"Then, please, ask him."

"How can I explain without making Anna seem responsible?"

Sandy Sinclair pursed his lips. Perhaps he was on the point of blurting out that Anna *was* responsible.

Sandy said, "She plans t' marry Robert Rudge."

"Good God! Is that true?"

"Aye, sir."

"When?"

"When her bill of divorcement comes due."

"Rudge?" Randall Bontine laughed wryly. "Robert Rudge, damn me! That sly old reprobate."

"Could I come here – for a while at least?" said Sandy.

"Does Rudge know of her intentions towards him?"

"He has been t' call on her," Sandy said. "She's been to Drymen too."

"Yes, but is it marriage or matching that the damned fellow's after?" Randall said. "Come now, Sinclair, don't look so shocked. You must be aware of his reputation."

"It's marriage."

"Hence the torment?"

"Aye, sir."

"Do you suppose that quitting Strachan will cure it?"

"Take me back, sir, I implore you."

Randall Bontine put his hand on Sinclair's shoulder.

He said, "Well, I know you for an honest worker and I would prefer to have you employed here than skulking about the roads mending wheels for farthings. Yes, I'll consult my brother about it. No doubt he will inform your father."

"Thank you, Laird Bontine. I'll no' let you down."

"By God, I'll make sure that you don't. Now go on with you. Leave the arrangement to me."

Sandy hesitated. "What – what about Anna?"

"Anna," said Randall, "is no longer our concern. Let her choose Rudge. She deserves him, don't you think?"

"Aye, sir," said Sandy gratefully, and without more ado left Ottershaw for Strachan Castle.

Word came down to Anna from Catriona who had it from Aileen who in turn, received it from Mistress Alicia: Sandy was returning to employment at Ottershaw. Anna fizzed like a sulphur fuse and could not see the move as reasonable and advantageous. Sandy, it seemed, had been offered the post of deputy grieve. Lachlan had urged the young man to accept, to return to Ottershaw. Anna lost all sense of propriety. She sought Sandy out at once, away across the bottom field where he had been weeding the late crop of carrots, a crop he would not now take in.

He shouldered the hoe at her approach and awaited her arrival like a sentry.

"I've heard the news," Anna, still thirty yards away, shouted.

"Aye, is it not good news?"

"Good for you. Bad for me."

"I thought you'd be pleased," said Sandy, "at my good fortune."

She stood before him, legs all clay, skirt hems sodden, and planted her fists on her hips.

Sandy stood his ground, leaning on the hoe, the rank uprooted weeds straggled along the rows behind him. Rain was coming in again, drifting across the Lightwater.

"You're abandonin' me," Anna cried.

"It's nothin' t' do with you."

"Could you not have asked me first?"

"For why? You're all set up wi' Robert bloody Rudge. I've nothin', except this place, an' that's less than good enough for me, Anna."

"You'd be grieve here."

"On Strachan! I'd as soon be grieve t'an acre o' sand in the bloody Sahara desert."

"What'll your father do wi'out your aid?"

"Employ two other hands."

"Two?"

"I do the work o' two men here, since you've failed t' notice."

"What conceit. Is Lachlan no' angry wi' you?"

"He's fair delighted. I am too. It's not every day the laird o' Ottershaw asks for a lad t' be deputy grieve."

"It's me, it's because o' me," said Anna.

"Huh!" Sandy exclaimed.

"I'll not be grunted at, Sandy Sinclair."

"Listen, Anna, I'm flesh an' blood. How can I stand t' be near you, day in and day out, when I'll never have you?"

"If I—"

"NO. DAMN YOU," Sandy shouted.

He turned and scythed with the hoe and tossed up a great pile of the weeds into the wet air and slashed at them as they fell. He threw the hoe to the ground then and, relieved, swung back to face her.

"You ruined my brother, Anna, but you'll no' ruin me."

"Matt brought ruin on himself."

"Aye, perhaps he did. But then again you did nothin' to aid him. What you want, Anna Cochran, you somehow contrive to get. Well, you'll get no more from me. Go to Robert Rudge, press yoursel' against him, make cow's eyes at him. Let him melt. I'm off out of harm's way."

She was used to the stings and insults from Cat and Aileen, to Alicia Bontine's wounding remarks. But they were women and it seemed natural for them to be jealous of her.

It was Randall who had called Sandy away. Did the laird still fear that she would ensnare Sandy as she had ensnared him? Was Randall jealous too? Such foolishness gave her a little comfort.

Leaving the hoe upon the row, weeds all tossed about, Sandy started away across the field towards the castle.

Anna gave a great sigh. She wiped her hand across her face. The air had made her skin wet. She wiped the hand upon her skirts and looked down. Bare feet in the clay. Legs, all unhosed, streaked with the soil of the fields. She had loved a laird and gained nothing from it except the responsibility of a bastard bairn. No, she told herself; Robbie was no bastard. He had been born in wedlock and his paternity had never been questioned or examined. He was a Sinclair, not a Bontine. In due course the woman from Piperhaugh would bear Randall proud sons. The heirs to Ottershaw would be decently established and she, Anna Cochran Sinclair, would still be fettered to the fields; and her son after her. Until that instant, alone on the edge of the autumn pasture, Anna had not admitted that Robert Rudge was her one and only hope. She had thought of him as an alternative to something better, a measure of safety should destiny not treat her as well as she deserved. But Robert Rudge was all she had.

If Sandy was correct and Mr Rudge wanted only to establish claim to the managership of Kennart, then she could not afford to tarry. She must captivate him without Elspeth's power and money. She must make Mr Rudge fall in love with her. She must earn his *respect*, for she had learned from Randall that it was not enough to be desired. Love and playing at love were games for lassies. For a woman with a bairn and a sorry history behind her she needed a man she could trust and who would trust her in turn. Mr Robert Rudge it would have to be. And soon.

Anna nodded and picked up the wooden hoe. She tidied the weeds into a pile, patted them with the heel and then, with the implement over her shoulder trudged decisively across the field to bring in the beasts for milking.

Anna had made up her mind.

Later Keir Bolderon was to wish that he had been a little less circumspect in his courtship of Elspeth Patterson, that he had had the zeal to go down on his knees before her and, even in the presence of two small chaperones, Sarah and Mary Jean, declare his undying love and whisk her to the altar before she could catch her breath.

It would not have been necessary for him to marry Elspeth, merely to have stated his intention to do so and to receive her promise in return. In the wake of disaster he could not expect her to forgive him or understand that beneath his silence and scheming there was a kind of love.

He should have surrendered the Abbeyfield, flung aside his ambition, given himself honestly and openly to her. On that October afternoon he should have told her the truth. But he did not. He was still wary, and confused. How could Elspeth agree to marry him when she still believed herself to be the legal wife of James Simpson Moodie of Balnesmoor?

Keir Bolderon invited her to bring the children to his house for tea. She accepted willingly, did not hedge. Mr Bolderon spurred his servants to produce sweet fare in a quantity that would have fed half the bairns on the field and not just the pair from the Bennets' cottage. Elspeth arrived promptly at three o'clock. She wore a plain brown outfit with narrow lapels and a round hat trimmed in velvet that seemed so perfectly suited to her that Keir Bolderon suspected it had been brought from her wardrobe in the weaver's mansion. Mary Jean wore a clean pinafore and a starched bonnet with blue ribbons. Sarah was dressed in a small plaid pattern and carried new shoes and stockings which she put on at the gate, hiding shyly behind Elspeth while she did so. Keir Bolderon welcomed them warmly.

It was a dry, dull sort of day and the parlour of the house, though not at all grand, had a cosy glow to it, with a coal fire in the hearth and brass all gleaming, the tea-table set before it. Before tea, however, Mary Jean and Sarah were taken out into the little garden by Dorrith, his servant, to see a donkey he had brought in to amuse them and to feed it cabbage leaves and carrot tops.

Alone with Elspeth for a few precious moments Mr Bolderon was tempted to press his advantage, to blurt out words of love, to propose. Still confused, however, he restrained himself. He was afraid to commit himself to a situation which might strain the tenuous friendship between them. Instead he asked after her collier, learned that Matt Shearer was quite well. He enquired after the health of the boy, learned that Davy Bennet was as well as could be expected. He enquired after the sullen girl-child, was told that Mouse too was in excellent spirits. He might have enquired after the welfare of the household cat if there had been one but Elspeth, at this turn, lifted the conversation away from stilted politeness and asked him directly when he expected Snippets to return.

Mr Bolderon expressed the opinion that Snippets would be back at his desk as soon as he could hold a pen without trembling and that, such was his determination, that might be very soon indeed.

Elspeth asked what would become of her. Mr Bolderon told her that she had performed so excellently well that he intended to create the post of paymaster depute. She asked, very practically, about the wage that the new post would provide. Mr Bolderon, thinking quickly, informed her that it would pay only fifteen shillings in the week, not twenty.

At this inopportune moment Dorrith returned the children with the information that the rain had just begun, and hadn't she better get on with serving tea since that was her job not being a nursemaid in wet weather?

"Servants!" said Mr Bolderon with a smile. "How odd is the relationship between a man and his cook."

"We had a cook once who—"

Aghast, Elspeth stopped in mid-sentence. Mr Bolderon, flustered too, pretended that he had not heard.

He beckoned to Mary Jean who came from behind Mammy's chair, climbed up on the manager's knee and let him take off her bonnet and duly admire the ribbons of which she was very proud. Sarah, brown and solemn, watched without a word. She would dart a glance now and then at the scones and jams and dishes of jelly that adorned the table.

"Aye, she's a wee pretty thing," said Keir Bolderon. "She has her mother's features but her colouring—"

"After my husband," said Elspeth quickly.

In due course tea was brought in: plates of buttered bread, a bramble pie, still steaming, and a bowl of clotted cream.

Sarah managed a smile when she was invited to sit on the padded bench by Mary Jean's side and help herself to whatever took her fancy.

Crumbs, flecks of cream, droplets of jam flew in all directions. There seemed to be as much adhering to the girls' faces as ever made its way into their tummies.

Keir Bolderon was not offended by their lack of manners. He enjoyed the sight of their appetite for it reminded him of his brothers and sisters and the infrequent treats that had come their way when he was young.

What pleased him, however, was the confidence with which Elspeth coped with the battery of tea-things. She was expert with tongs, could tell a hot-water jug from a teapot and dispensed, at Mr Bolderon's invitation, slices of bread and butter without a hitch. That she had presided over better boards than this Mr Bolderon did not doubt.

In the parlour with Elspeth on that dismal October afternoon a sort of forgetfulness descended on the manager of the Abbeyfield. He was contented. He would have been more contented still if he could have come out with the truth, put his hand over hers and imparted – somehow – the news that she was no longer wife but widow to the tyrant who had brought her to this low pass.

At half past four Elspeth called the girls to her. She wiped their faces with a napkin, told Sarah to fetch the bonnets as it was time they found their way home before darkness came thickly and the rain got worse.

Mr Bolderon experienced a strange sense of loss. He begged them to stay longer. But Dorrith had appeared in the doorway with the big tray in her arms and gave him such a glare that he shrank from it and said that, if leave they must, he would bring out the gig, which he seldom used, and put on the hood and ride them to the road by the field gate to save their pretty clothes from soiling.

Egged on by the girls, Elspeth agreed and Mr Bolderon hastened out of the house to the leaning shed where the gig was stored. He prayed that his horse would not baulk at being put into shafts after so many months of the saddle and generally fretted that the afternoon, which had been so pleasant, would end in farce. But the horse was unconcerned. The gig wheels squeaked on their axles and made the girls laugh. Mr Bolderon said that he employed two dozen mice to run inside the hubs to help the vehicle along. The girls laughed even louder and flung themselves about under the shawl he had brought to keep them warm.

Elspeth did not reprimand them. She sat by him on the front board, under the tar-black hood, while he edged the conveyance out of the back gate and along the dark path through trees and on to the road. It was only a couple of miles to the field gate but Keir Bolderon drove the horse at hardly more than a walk, spinning out the afternoon, making it last. The thought of the long evening, alone in the parlour, filled him with gloom.

Across the river skirts of cloud lifted a little and painted a ghostly sheen upon the water. The lights of keel-boats could be seen, faint against the lading quays. The thatch dwellings on the far shore held firelight in their tiny windows. The Placket clock chimed out five notes. Dusk intensified around the sound and increased Mr Bolderon's melancholy. Only the giggling of the bairns behind him and Elspeth's voice murmuring a snatch of song seemed counter to the effects of weather and the season.

"What's that?" Keir Bolderon said.

"Hm?"

"The air you were singing."

"Och, it's nothing, Mr Bolderon."

"No, tell me what it was."

"My mam used to sing it to me, whiles, when I was young. I never knew its name. She called it the *Sleepin' Song*."

"Will you come again for tea?" Keir Bolderon said.

"If I'm invited, yes."

"Next Sunday?"

"No, Mr Bolderon, not quite so soon. I fancy that would soon turn it into a habit. In two weeks, though, or three, I'd be happy—"

"Two weeks it is," said Keir Bolderon, consoled.

By chance Anna was not paid her half-yearly wage until the middle of October. The sum was due on the very first day of the month. Upon that day, in consequence, her term of employment expired and she was free to leave her master's employment without redress or recrimination if she chose so to do.

All of this Anna discovered by consulting the relevant chapter in *The Pocket Lawyer*. If her interpretation of the clauses was accurate then Mr Gilbert was in default by not summoning her to the drawing-room until twenty-two days after the due day and not paying her wage on time. She had made no great fuss about the delay. Indeed she hardly thought of it for so many other things crowded upon her mind that October that she had no desire to spend her pittance on anything much, except some clothing for Robbie.

Mr Gilbert too had much on his mind. He had returned from the wedding at Piperhaugh to a mess of small debts and a disturbance on his estate – Sandy's departure – that would have to be resolved by the hiring of at least one reliable hand from the local community.

In addition the brothers Pryde had discreetly informed him that all was not well with the affairs of the bank. Quite what this meant Gibbie was not sure. The Prydes had kept their cards too close to their chests for too long to take him willingly into their confidence. Perhaps they were warning him. Perhaps they had had some wind of his duplicity in the matter of the Moodie trust money or – and Gibbie would not put it beyond them – perhaps they sought to lay hands upon it for their own purposes.

Moodie's money was, however, gone. Gone into the hands of Mr Fotheringham who had – though Gilbert knew it not – already spent much of it in buying into the iron works at Carron, not upon the rejuvenation of the Abbeyfield.

If he had been possessed of that fact then Gilbert Bontine would not have been uneasy and distracted but would have been thrown into a great feathery panic. Mr Fotheringham, of course, told Gibbie nothing. The gentleman of Placket was not yet committed to begin paying interest upon the loan which was not, on paper, a loan at all and yield from the share would not be forthcoming until the 'old lease' expired and the 'new lease' was subscribed and signed.

Strachan's income for the capital year was minute. It was far less, because of weather, than Gibbie had anticipated. And now Gilbert had come to the day when, like it or not, he must fork away more of his hard-earned income and pay his servants their wages. He had the bag of money and the book. He summoned the servants one by one, beginning with Lachlan. He paid them all, including Edith Williams, before he got down to Anna Sinclair who had been waiting below in the hall for the signal that it was her turn to confront the master in the ultimate relationship of all servants, that moment of acknowledgement of the fundamental purpose of labour – payment.

Anna entered the room. She wore a shawl and bonnet over her dress and had shoes upon her feet. Gibbie did not even notice her apparel. He sighed as he counted out twelve shillings from the bag and placed the coins upon the table.

The brown leather bag was now absolutely empty and seemed to Gibbie, as he peered into it, oddly symbolic. He glimpsed Anna's hand as it slid the money from the table and into a shabby velvet purse. He looked up, noticed nothing, sighed, nodded.

Anna said, "Thank ye, Mr Gilbert. I will now be terminatin' my employment here."

"Yes, yes," said Gibbie absently.

"Forthwith," said Anna.

"What in God's name do you mean, girl?"

"I'm leavin' too, sir."

"But – but why? You were put here by my brother and he will be—"

"I was put here by nobody," said Anna sharply.

"I have—have a bond—"

"There's no paper document, Mr Gilbert; none I've ever seen nor heard about," said Anna. "If you tell me you've some sort of document between you an' Mr Randall I can tell you it's worthless."

"You can tell me, can you?" said Gilbert, temper rising at the girl's attitude.

"My son an' I are leavin'," she said. "We have no goods belongin' t' Strachan and no debts t' square away. I'm paid to the end o' the term and I'll not be askin' for extra days."

"The agreement?"

"The law o' master an' servant allows me to do as I wish."

"Anna, for God's sake, where will you go?"

"Drymen. To Mr Robert Rudge's house."

"Rudge?" Gilbert exclaimed. "Rudge!"

"I'm to become his wife."

"What if Sinclair – your husband – what if he returns for you?"

"I canna wait for that day," said Anna. "Besides, sir, Matt'll never show his nose here again. He dare not. In six months' time I'll petition for a divorcement. It'll not be denied me nor will the court delay it. I've Mr Hildebrand's word on that."

"Hildebrand? What the devil have you been up to, Anna?"

"Nothin', Mr Gilbert. My position here is – *un-ten-able*."

"I must consult my wife – and your father-in-law. Wait here."

"There's no need t' consult anybody," said Anna. "I'm not obliged to *ask* for release, Mr Gilbert. I'm declarin' my intention an' I'll be gone before noon."

"To live with Rudge?"

"Aye, sir."

"Does Rudge *know* that you intend to arrive on his doorstep?"

"It's at Mr Rudge's express invitation."

"The devil! Stealin' my servants behind my back."

Anna said steadily, "Mr Rudge an' I will be married in due course o' time. Meanwhile I'm to be his housekeeper."

Gilbert did not know enough of Robert Rudge's domestic arrangements to enquire as to what fate Anna had in mind for the present incumbent. He got to his feet, shook his head, tried to lay an avuncular hand upon her shoulder.

Anna stepped nimbly out of reach.

Gibbie could not imagine what he had ever seen in her and why, now and then, he had actually felt sorry for her. A reflection of the attraction she had held for Randall had lit her up for him too, perhaps. All that was gone. She was, after all, nothing but a self-seeking, thoughtless trollop who would bed, let alone wed, any man who would promise her a life of idleness.

"Anna," Gilbert Bontine told her, "you are lettin' me down."

She answered with a short bark of laughter and, allowing him no further opportunity to bully or persuade her to change her mind, turned on her heel and left the drawing-room.

Helplessly Gibbie watched her go.

He had lost control of the one charge that Randall had ever given him, to look after and care for Anna Sinclair and her son. What, in God's name, would Randall say to him? What would he say to Randall?

And, as if that worry was not enough, who would bring in the cows?

"Alicia," he shouted, running across the corridor to the main staircase. "Alicia, what shall I do?"

Anna heard him as she wrapped Robbie into a warm winter coat and roped her bundle to her hip.

She took one last look around the hole in the wall of the corridor which had been her drawing-room and her parlour for so many miserable months and, as the Sinclairs, those who were left, came running out of their niches, alarmed by Gibbie's cry, she found Robbie's hand and led him quietly out of the kitchen door and away across the yard to the field path that would take her, clear of the turnpikes, to Robert's house in

Drymen where she would be safe and welcome and would make her new home.

It had been a particularly arduous day for Robert Rudge. Scarf had ridden in from the big market at Perth with the worrying news that prices had risen once more and that he had not been able to negotiate for wool crops on the ground. Shepherds had suffered from the wet as well as cattle-owners and there was a dearth of mutton all across the country. On Rudge's instruction Scarf had left to try his luck on the Glasgow market where imported wool might be available at reasonable cost, enough to keep the tartan cloths coming from the Kennart looms in sufficient quantity to meet orders.

It was after dark before Robert Rudge got home to Drymen. He noticed that the parlour lamp was lit and as he passed the front of the house saw Anna Sinclair and her child seated in the oak chair, the bairn fast asleep in his mother's arms. He put away his horse with alacrity and hurried into the house through the kitchens.

"What does Mrs Sinclair want?" he asked his grizzled servant, McFadzean.

"She says she's come t' stay, Mr Rudge."

"To stay?"

"Aye – an' if she comes, I go."

"Patience, Mrs McFadzean. Let me see what it's about before you collect your belongings."

He entered the parlour with a smile upon his face.

Anna did not rise. Keeping still and small she clutched the child against her as if Mr Rudge was a slave master who had come to separate them. It was something of an act, of course, but it touched Robert Rudge's heart by its appropriateness.

"I have left Strachan, Robert," Anna said.

"Is there a reason?"

"I canna wait t' be your wife; that is the reason."

"You cannot be my wife until the divorcement."

"I can be your servant. I'll be the best servant you've ever had, I promise."

Robert Rudge did not doubt it.

He hesitated. He was still a little in awe of the power of his present housekeeper, the indomitable McFadzean, whose in-laws, burly tenant farmers scattered along the road to the lochside, might come out with the intention of teaching him a lesson. He had seen evidence of the moral outrage of the wild men of Balmaha and he did not want to risk offending them.

Anna said, crying, "I'll be all that a wife can be, Robert. Dinna turn me out. I've nowhere else to go, me an' Robbie."

Still Robert Rudge hesitated.

If it had been a simple seduction of a simple country lass he would have known exactly what to do. He would have gone down beside her, stooped over her, separated her gently from the sleeping child, would have made the child comfortable on the love-seat, would have kissed and fondled Mama and, in ten minutes or so, would have had her upstairs and out of her skirts and bodice. McFadzean would have frowned and muttered, like the good God-fearing woman she was. But McFadzean was sensible and practical and knew what her master was. She would respect his manliness and his natural needs and would bake one of her beef pies for supper for Robert Rudge never sent away a lassie unsatisfied and unfed.

But Anna had come to stay. Suddenly he feared for his privacy, the clockwork routine of his home and wondered at the destruction that this dark-haired girl had wreaked on the menfolk of at least three families. Dark-eyed, moist-eyed, moist-lipped, hair smooth about her cheeks, her skin pale in the lamplight and her bosom heaving with the emotion of it all, Anna awaited his decision.

He said, "You put me into a difficult position, my love. I'm an unmarried man and there may be complications if and when we seek legal blessing in marriage."

"If – *if* Elspeth returns," Anna said, "I'll see to it that you remain manager of Kennart."

"Oh!"

"If Elspeth does not come back, an' the Moodie sisters get their claws on the mill then we'll swim t'gether. I'm young an' can do things that—"

"Yes, yes, yes, Anna," Robert Rudge said. "I'm not in need of illustration. I do see the advantage."

"Think of it, Robert, as a contract."

"Yes, Anna, but which of us finds the bargain?"

"Neither of us," said Anna. "Unless my sister comes back."

"You are forcin' me to gamble."

"Have you a room for the child, where he can sleep?"

"I have. Small but snug. You may sleep there too, Anna, until I decide—"

She got up. Robbie was slung awkwardly in both arms. The child stirred, whimpered, clung to her breast, legs dangling. His fingers plucked at the bodice of her frock as if he still sought to suckle at her breast.

Robert Rudge said, "Give him to me, Anna."

He took the boy gently from her arms and carried him upstairs while Anna followed with the candle. Tucked snugly into the bed in the narrow little room under the eaves Robbie turned his face into the bolster and settled instantly into deep sleep.

Anna said, "Now, Robert, where is my bed?"

"I'll have a cot made up here."

"Is that how you wish it t' be?"

"Perhaps, sometimes—"

"Take me now," said Anna.

Robert Rudge puffed out his cheeks and gave a low, soundless whistle. It was not an affectation, a sign of resignation. He wanted her now, wanted her so badly that he could hardly resist. But he gathered himself, said, "Let's pretend, Anna, that you're a lady of quality and I'm a gentleman. We'll have a quiet bite of supper downstairs and then, when the servants have retired, we'll stroll upstairs."

The idea pleased Anna.

She grinned. "Provided the supper doesn't take too long."

"Do you really want me, Anna?"

"Really I do."

Later that night, throughout the night, Anna was to prove her sincerity with such enthusiasm and invention that Robert Rudge, for all his experience with women, felt a little shocked at her verve and, before the candle burned out in its blue-glass dish, submitted to exhaustion and gave himself up to being loved like a lord.

Davy and Sarah, perhaps, should have told Elspeth what was in the wind between their sister and Matt Shearer but Elspeth was so seldom with them now that she seemed almost as much a stranger as the sailorman. Besides, Davy was uncertain as to what part Mouse had played in attracting Matt Shearer's attentions. He seethed with frustration as well as rage at his lack of knowledge on such matters. Sarah, on the other hand, had a woman's instinct for truth and not enough fire in her blood yet to be jealous of her sister. She held her tongue to protect the romance and in consequence the love between Matt and Mousie flourished without impediment.

Elspeth might have intervened. She might have made appeal to Matt's sense of honour. It was not honour that Mouse found compelling in the broad-chested coal-hewer. She hungered to be loved by him, to be changed by his touch and knowledge of him, things that she had realised were possible and attainable since the night she had rubbed her breasts against his bare body.

At home Mouse mooned about in a moist red dream of matching. In the tunnels she laboured like a demon, hastening to and from the nearness of Matt as busy and mindless as her namesake in a harvest field shorn by the reapers. The grieve's son, the arrogant whaler, the outlaw flushed when she called out his name. He answered her without sarcasm or teasing and asked a dozen times each shift how things fared with her and if she was weary and assured her that the drag would soon be over and that he would wait for her by the gate and they would walk home together in the October starlight. He kept his promise too. When they walked thus Mouse felt as if she had gone to Heaven. She kept her tongue still for fear of offending him and let him put his big strong arm about her and help her across the plank bridge, as if she had not crossed it a thousand times without aid. She leaned on him lingeringly and, so far was she gone, even murmured thanks. Within the confines of the cottage Matt and she lived in a state of physical intimacy that some married couples never attained. Matt, however, was afraid of being thought a seducer. He would do no more than administer a kiss upon her brow or cheek and hold her briefly in his arms at the door. Indoors, with Sarah and Davy and Mary Jean, he was careful not to demonstrate how his feelings had changed. He would not allow Mouse to scramble on to his knee or even to touch him. They spoke in stilted and polite phrases but took little part in the general chatter of conversation as if being in love had removed them from reality.

Davy grew more and more sullen, seething with incomprehensible anger. He had never cared much for Mouse yet he was afraid of what might happen to her if she was ruined by this stranger, this coward. Anger and loathing knotted in his chest and his cough returned. He spent his days lying upon his bed, fists clenched and jaw set, and did no housekeeping at all. He wondered what they were doing below, his sister and the sailorman, if they were doing things that were bad, the things he had imagined himself doing but had never found the strength or the opportunity to try.

Elspeth was concerned about Davy. She bought him honey in the comb, which he ate with a spoon, and she sent Sarah to the Placket farm to purchase warm fresh milk which she forced Davy to drink while she watched him, as if he was a bloody infant, too small for solid foods. He could have told her what was wrong – if only he could have found the words.

It was late in the month, towards the Friday of All Hallows Eve, when Matt announced an intention to probe deeper into the millstone cave. It was the first Davy had heard of it and it galled him still more when Matt consulted Mouse and not him about the venture.

Matt had finished his supper and had pushed away the plate. Mouse was seated by him, her thigh brushing his under the table, and Elspeth was soothing Mary Jean, who had had a tumble at the minder's cottage that afternoon and had a bruise upon her brow which made her fractious.

Matt wiped his beard. "Well, Mousie, it seems to me we're runnin' through the seam damned quick."

"Aye, Matt, we are."

"What do y' say, Mousie, if we take a peep into the depths tomorrow?"

"I say we should, Matt."

Elspeth looked up. "Is it not dangerous, Matt?"

"I'll be careful, dinna fret."

"Matt'll take out coal, not rock," said Mouse.

"You'll need fresh candles," said Elspeth. "Wax candles. I think there are four still in Mr Bennet's box. They'll gutter less an' give more light than tallow."

"I'll take them down wi' me," said Mouse.

Half reclining on the bed, Davy held his hand against his throat to prevent an outburst of coughing. He could hear the seething in his lungs and felt an awful weakness in his limbs at the thought of Matt Shearer breaking down the back of his daddy's cave, changing its shape and nature.

Mouse said, "I'm to go first into the hole."

Davy heard himself speak. "Who says this?"

Mouse answered haughtily, "Matt does."

Davy mimicked his sister under his breath. "Matt does, Matt does." Aloud he said, "Is Matt too feart t' go by himself?"

Sarah said, "Matt's too big for it."

Elspeth said, "Matt, promise me you'll take care."

Matt dismissed her fears casually. "Aye, aye."

Davy lifted himself on his elbows. "You'll be needin' t' brace the roof first, remember."

Mouse said, "Matt knows what t' do."

Davy said, "Matt knows every bloody thing, I suppose."

"Knows more than you," Mouse snapped.

"Thinks he bloody does," Davy retorted.

Matt said, "I'll knock in a lateral prop, two perhaps, from the rock t' the coal wall. I've got timber down there already."

Davy could not bring himself to address the sailorman directly. He said, "Mouse, tell him t' keep the lateral props short. Three feet o' green wood's right for a brace."

"You're all wind, Davy Bennet," Mouse told him. "You've never propped in your life."

"I heard Daddy talk—" Davy began.

"Aye, but I *saw* Daddy do it," said Mouse smugly. "So it's me Matt'll have t' rely on."

"That's enough," Elspeth intervened.

Too late: Davy rolled on to his side, turning his back on his sisters, on the stranger who had usurped his rightful place as head of the family, who cut the coal he should have cut. In his chest there was a constricting pain. Tears swam under his eyelids. He fought not to cough, not to weep.

Oblivious to Davy's distress, Matt went on, "I'll use dry wedges, of course. I'll take a pick, mallet an' rods. The less I cut the safer it'll be."

"What if Mouse gets stuck?" said Sarah.

"I'll no' get stuck," said Mouse.

Davy hardly heard them now. He laid his head on the bolster, put a hand to the side of his head, fingers to his ear and wriggled his shoulder to hide his face.

"Davy?" Elspeth spoke tenderly, stooped over him, a forearm raised as if to shield him from the light. He wanted to turn, take her in his arms, have Elspeth hold him as she held her bairn. Instead he slashed out petulantly at her.

"Leave m' alone."

"Davy! Oh, Davy!" He heard the woman sigh. "It's hard for you, I know."

She was the only one who understood. Even she could not guess at half of it. He could hear Matt's rumbling laughter, Mousie's sniggers. Matt spoke. The others laughed, even Sarah and Mary Jean. Perhaps they were laughing at him. Laughing at his tears, at his unmanly need to be cradled and cuddled, mocking him for his weakness.

Elspeth touched him. "Let me help you, Davy."

Suddenly all the soft emotions were puffed away like fat on a hot stone. He flung himself round and sat up.

"Get t' hell," he shouted. "Get t' hell an' let me be."

He swung his feet to the floor and stood up.

The others were staring at him, not laughing now. Fury suffused his limbs, bringing with it a false strength, sufficient to carry him past them and out of the door of the cottage.

Chill in the air, the darkness deep; Davy forged on across the plank bridge without glancing back. He heard Elspeth's cry. She called his name. He did not respond. She did not pursue. He needed the cold and the darkness to cool the fever that raged in him. He ran along the path between the trees and turned on to the track that took him down to the workings

Horses stamped and blethered in the stables. Davy hurried on to the round shape of the coping around the Dead Man. He climbed on to it as if it had been his destination all along

The shaft was boarded over but the planks had warped. When he knelt upon them and put his face down he could smell the dank pit, could feel the great dark space dropping away below him. He plastered himself belly down upon the planking, holding to its rim as if to a spinning wheel. He had fled from the cottage so that he might weep and rage unobserved. But here on the lid of the Dead Man he found solace and anger and tears went out of him. It was cold, a lovely skin-crimping cold. The blood in his body felt like white snow, his lungs rock-hard and icy. He put his ear to the crack and listened to the emptiness, felt the knowledge of what he must do come to him like an echo.

He grinned, nodded, then got up and went back to the cottage, all calm and assured.

When Mouse spoke to him, he ignored her.

When Matt asked him where he had been, he gave no answer.

When Elspeth said, "Davy, you'll do yourself harm," though, he grinned again as he had done on the roof of the Dead Man and told her, "Not me. Not me," and, shivering, clambered into his bed again and tugged the blanket over his head.

Night terrors had not troubled Elspeth for many months. She slept lightly but without dreams. That night, however, she was trapped in a net of visions, isolated in the millstone cavern. She screamed silently into silence. Sarah was there and Mary Jean. The girls were perched above her like sea-birds on a cliff. They were holding out their arms to her and crying. Silence changed the dreadful dream into nightmare, made Elspeth twist and sweat in the tangle of blankets in her corner. Image followed image: a coiling snake, a stone-grey lizard. Creatures hazy and without form threatened her in the tunnel. In the cave her daughter cowered on the high ledge, crying out for Mammy, Mammy, while Sarah hovered in space like a tern cawing at her. Then Mary Jean was flapping her arms, cawing too, trying so hard to fly away, fly away, fly—

"Elspeth, Elspeth, for God's sake wake up."

Hand upon her shoulder pulled her out of it. She snapped open her eyes, stared up at Matt, naked to the waist, huge as a genie in the candle flicker.

He frowned down. "What ails you, 'Pet?"

She reached out thankfully and grasped his arm. He was so real, so solid. He connected her with Balnesmoor and the time before she had known James, with the green days of her girlhood on the high hill of Drumglass.

"Matt," she gasped. "Oh, Matt, I was dreamin'."

"A nightmare by the sound o' it."

Mouse suddenly appeared by Matt's side. She placed a hand upon his hip, rubbed herself against him. She seemed tiny as a sprite in her shift, hair, grown long, falling about her shoulders.

Awake too, Mary Jean kneeled round-eyed on the edge of the mattress.

"Bad dream, Mammy. Bad dream."

"Aye, love. Gone now. All gone."

Matt said, "A taste o' whisky will cure you, 'Pet."

Elspeth shook her head, managed a feeble smile.

"I'm fine," she whispered.

"I'll cuddle ye, Mammy." Mary Jean scrambled into bed beside her, snuggling down ostentatiously, arms wrapped about Elspeth's waist. "Go t' sleep now. Soon be the mornin'."

How often had she consoled her daughter with those words. It would, indeed, soon be morning. She tried to imagine sunlight and a clean breeze off the Forth. All that came to mind, though, was the shaft and the tunnel, the trap under the millstone.

She shuddered.

Mary Jean clung to her tightly.

"I'm – I'm all right, really."

Mouse was looking up at Matt, still touching him. If she had been more alert Elspeth might have seen the adoration in the girl-child's eyes, a reflection of her own faraway innocence and the wonderment of being in love. But she was too enervated to notice and, a moment later, Matt and Mouse slipped away, taking the candle with them.

Mary Jean gave her mother a little clumsy kiss upon the nose and Elspeth's tensions slackened. She placed an arm about her daughter.

In the sighing of the wind about the cottage she could almost make out the children's insubstantial voices crying aloud – *Fly away, fly away, fly away* – but whether they spoke to her or to each other Elspeth had no idea.

She rose early, long before dawn, to make ready for the day

* * *

Gossip abounded in the villages of Drymen and Balnesmoor. The weavers of Kennart, who knew old Rudge well, were hardly surprised at this latest titbit. They tutted and smirked, shook their heads at the manager's escapade. Some envied him his 'housekeeper'. Others muttered that this must be the last straw in wickedness and that now, surely, God would punish Robert Rudge. Imagine daring to live out of wedlock with another man's wife in the shadow of the Drymen parish church! The fact that the other man's wife was the notorious Anna Cochran Sinclair added spice to the affair. In drinking-dens along the back roads and in taverns in village squares the talk those nippy nights was all of Rudge and his paramour.

At first Mrs McFadzean, the 'original' housekeeper, did not feel any great resentment towards Anna Sinclair, who, in fact, pitched in with domestic chores and only played the dame when Mr Rudge came home of an evening. But Mrs McFadzean soon found that she could not intimidate Anna as she had browbeaten a string of kitchen maids before her. It was the loss of that contest of wills that turned Mrs McFadzean against the interloper. Anna would not even let her bully the present maid-servant, Isa, a wall-eyed waif from Kennart, too slow to be used in the manufactory and too ugly to find a husband. Anna was very sharp with Mrs McFadzean, told her in no uncertain terms that Isa was not a slave and deserved a measure of civility to temper strictness. Mrs McFadzean was outraged. She appealed to Mr Rudge, who placated her as best he could.

The squabble might have blown over but for the attitude of the elders and kirk-buddies who, through the minister, managed to convince Mrs McFadzean that her soul would be doomed if she dwelled with the vile abomination. So Mrs McFadzean left Mr Rudge's employ and went to be a servant to her brother and his wife who lived in a hovel on the banks of Loch Lomond and was miserable in spite of the five guineas that Mr Rudge gave her as a mark of appreciation for her years of loyal service. Mr Rudge, at that time, would have paid the world to go away if he could have met the world's price.

Love, alas, did not bring a snap and a skip to Mr Rudge's step. It did not brace him as it would have done a young buck. In fact he crept about the mill and climbed the office stairs as stiffly as if somebody had taken a switch to his back. He did not have the juice left to be severe with workers and traders and might be said to have 'mellowed' under the influence of the woman from Strachan and Ottershaw. If the weavers had known the truth of it they would have been shocked and amazed. The manager of Kennart had finally fallen under the fatal spell of Eros and what had begun as a plot to secure his future had swiftly become a snare from which he could not escape.

Anna was lithe and beautiful, without modesty or scruple, and more inventive than he would have believed possible. The tricks of the amorous art seemed to come to her naturally. She thought nothing of parading herself before him like a nymph, quite unclad. His mind smoked with visions of her and his body ached for her throughout the day at Kennart. She possessed him soul and body. He was more slave to Anna Cochran Sinclair than master. For all that, Robert Rudge had his pride. He gave as good as he got and did not deny her her pleasure by pleading fatigue or distraction.

"Are you happy here, Anna?" he would ask.

"Aye, I am."

"Are you happy with me?"

"I've never been happier with any man, Robert."

Lying upon his back, without nightshirt or nightcap, Mr Rudge would grin like an old wolf. "Will you still marry me, Anna?"

"As soon as I'm free."

His lids would droop. He would sigh with contentment at the prospect of all the nights of pleasure that they would share when they were man and wife. He would give a little start when she bent over him again. He would open his eyes and see her breasts and the soft line of her throat and her rapacious mouth, lips parted and the tip of her tongue showing.

"Will I kiss you t' sleep, Robert?"

He knew what she meant and was astonished by it. But he would nod and lift his head and let her lower her breasts for kisses as if he was bidding them goodnight separately, let her slither down by him, her tongue working little patterns over his chest and neck and belly in a manner never written about even in the most salacious fiction he had read; and he would grunt and clasp an arm about her and hold her very, very tightly as if afraid that she would abandon him in the night or devour him whole.

As for Anna, once she had been rid of the housekeeper and had the running of the neat little house all to herself she too put all thought of Elspeth from her mind. She sharpened herself up to be a wife in the parlour with almost the same enthusiasm as she was mistress in bed. Next year, when she was free, Robert Rudge would make her honest. There would be no fear for Robbie's future. Perhaps she would bear Robert a son or two to round out the family.

They would go to school in Edinburgh, her sons, just like Bontines. She would go on Robert's arm to visit, once the fuss had blown over, might even call at Ottershaw, wearing a pretty silk dress, take tea as an equal with Randall's fine lady, let Randall see what he had lost.

In the meantime she had Robert Rudge – and he was no mean man, just as loving as she wished without becoming all moony and daft like Sandy Sinclair. She tried not to think of Sandy or of Randall. Certainly she spared not a thought for Matt, her legal husband who had vanished so thoroughly from her ken and might for all she knew be decently dead.

Sarah was left with a candle and a water bottle to keep watch at the mouth of the narrow tunnel. She was just out of sight of the Ogilvies' room which, like all the other nooks on the base level, was running out of easy-cut coal and in three months or four would dry up completely.

Sarah did not like being left alone, though she could hear the *chack* of Mr Ogilvie's hammer and the growl of the daughters' voices, and even peep out cautiously to glimpse the shake of candlelight outside the room; that consoled her and calmed her fears.

She was sensible, was Sarah. She knew that Matt and Mouse had important work to do in the secret chamber and that they would be too occupied to keep watch for intruders.

While Sarah kept scout Matt and Mouse, alone in the cavern below the millstone slab, prepared to breach the slit at the rear of the cave. Matt had already made a stout ladder out of timbers and rope and had put up a brace upon which he could rest his chest and arms. He had taken a deep cut out of the coal seam to accommodate his right shoulder, a fall that had been broken and removed during the course of the morning. A ramp of chows led up to the ladder and the ladder, in turn, to crossbeam and the crack.

Sweating in a loincloth, Matt hauled himself to the cross brace and hung over it. He made three grooves in the coal. It was promisingly 'heavy' and dusty and did not splinter into fine edges under the hammer and swelling wedges. He had learned the trick of using dry wood for his wedges and received from Mouse an iron pot of drainage water which he poured over the wedges once they were crammed into place. Expansion forced splits in the solid face and, with luck, the coal would come away in thin flakes to the hammer thereafter.

Hanging on the brace with head and shoulders stuck into the corner was tiring. He had, however, caught a whiff of air from the finger-crack at the joint of roof and wall.

He placed his nose against it, sniffing like a sheep-dog, while Mouse, just below him, asked, "Is it fresh? Is it?"

Matt could not give an answer.

He climbed down from his perch to take a breather Mousie went up, wriggled on to the crosspiece, took a long sniff and frowned.

"Smells queer," she said, and sniffed again. "Like – like fish."

"I hope we're no' penetratin' the river bed."

"Ah-nah," Mouse assured him. "Daddy said the river was a thousand feet from here, measured on the tide."

"Measured on the tide? What did he mean?"

Nose to the fissure Mouse sniffed and frowned In fact she had never quite known what Daddy meant by the statement but had accepted the truth of it because of the conviction that he was always right. What she caught wind of through the fine crack was not liquid, of that she was sure. It smelled, now she thought about it, like one of the blocks of salted, rock-hard cod that poor widows bought from Mr Nicol's shop to boil into stew.

Mouse blinked. By her right ear the stub of a wedge made a little *cheeping* noise as it expanded and swelled. Matt had set the wedges in a triangle, giving three points of pressure. She blinked again as the lowest wedge emitted a creak, and a crack zigzagged across the outer surface of the coal wall. Three or four thumbnails of coal fell from the line to the cavern floor and Matt, who was more nervous than he cared to admit, gave a stifled whoop and jumped back.

Looking round and down Mouse caught the movement and laughed.

"It's workin', Matt. You'll get rods in here an' a slump o' some size quite soon."

"Come down, Mousie."

"When I'm done."

"Come down."

"Make me."

"Mousie, I'm givin' ye warnin' . . ."

She lifted her skirts and showed him her legs. Giggling, she tried to entice him on to the ladder, to put his hands upon her. Matt was too tense and too full of purpose to play games.

Reluctantly Mouse climbed down, making way for the man. With three rods in his left hand and the hammer hung on a thong about his shoulder, Matt squeezed up the ladder to the beam once more.

Twenty minutes later he had effected a cut. It was hardly a proper cut since the coal came down in awkward lumps, rumbling and cascading into the cavern in clouds of dust. He saw now that more expertise than he possessed was needed for 'exploration', and withdrew from the corner in defeat.

"I've done all I can do, Mousie," Matt declared. "It's o'er dangerous for one chap."

"But is there coal, Matt?"

"I canna say what's beyond the lie o' the slab."

"Let me try," said Mouse.

They were both coated with grime, and the initial excitement of discovery had waned. Mouse, however, was not one to give up easily. She scaled the ladder and got herself on to the beam, hunched under the roof.

"Candle," she said.

Matt handed her up a fresh stick, newly lighted, guarding the flame as best he could.

It was small work and fussy. Mouse was good at it. Matt watched admiringly as she stretched herself along the beam, just as high and tight as she could get and, holding the candle-cup in the palm of her right hand, pushed it along the cut as far as it would go.

"It burns," she said.

Her face was hidden by her shoulder. She wriggled, lowering one leg over the brace. From below Matt could see her calf and thigh. He would have looked away if he had not been afraid that she might fall. He felt a terrible affinity with the pit-girl and had to fight an urge to thrust his hands around her, to feel her naked flesh. It was not the time or the place. He concentrated on staring at the high, shadowy crack into which, astonishingly, Mouse had managed to insert her head and shoulders.

"Can y' see anythin'?" Matt whispered. "Anythin' at all?"

"There's no stream o' air, Matt." Her voice was hollow. "But the candle's burnin' clean as a whistle. Aye, wait, I can see."

"What? Is it more coal?"

"A hammer. Give m' up the hammer."

Legs kicking, skirts shanked up, she pulled herself from the aperture. There was fear in Matt that she would crush herself into it, would vanish into darkness out of his sight, out of his reach. He climbed a step of the ladder, hammer in hand. She twisted and leaned back, like a tabby on a tree branch. Her face was small, lambent and fierce.

"Give me that." She snatched the hammer from him. "Now, Matt, hold me tight."

He went up another foot, narrowing himself, placed one big hand about her thigh, the other across her bottom. She wriggled out along the cross brace and knocked away at some obstruction within the fissure. She gave a little squeal. Matt tightened his grip. He heard coal fall, not into the cavern but into space beyond the millstone slab. He knew without being told that they had broken through.

Mouse slid the hammer back to him. He slung it carefully about his shoulder, took hold on the girl again, pressing his body against the slab for support, slipping his hand along her thigh and calf in a firm caress, catching a ruck of her skirt.

She was making tiny sounds in her throat, panting with effort, in almost to the waist.

"Aaahhh!" Mouse exclaimed.

Panic flooded over Matt. "Come back, Mousie. That's far enough."

She ignored him, inched forward. She thrust the candle-cup within the dark place and held it there.

"Mouse, please," Matt pleaded.

Crabbing backwards, she returned. Matt shifted his hands from her legs to her waist, let her pivot on the beam, grinning.

"It's big," she told him, shiny-eyed. "Aye, it's big."

"But is it deep?"

"Miles deep. As far as the light goes, an' further."

She kicked her bare legs in delight at the discovery.

Matt held her. "Can it be reached?"

"It's the line o' this seam, our seam, nippit by the millstone slab. It can be blasted awa' wi' black powder."

"Mouse, I canna risk usin' powder."

"Three or four charges o' black powder an' we've a mile o' big coal for our profit."

"Nah, love," said Matt. "It's too much for us."

"It's ours, ours."

Prudently Matt said, "Come down, Mousie. We've gone far enough for one day."

"But it's ours, Matt."

"We – we'll discuss it wi' the others. See what can be done."

"We found it, Matt."

"We did, aye, but—"

She leaned forward on the perch, hands upon his shoulders, and kissed him full on the mouth. She leaned again, until her whole weight was supported upon him and he was braced hard to hold them both in balance.

"Mouse, you'll have us both off."

"Hold me tight, Matt."

Beneath the cotton garment he could feel her small breasts press against his chest. He was suddenly conscious of his nakedness and squirmed to hide his arousal. It was as if the fire which had smouldered in him had been fanned into a blaze by the draught from the long seam. He kissed her throat, her chin, her mouth, dragged her to him, her legs about his rib-cage, heels locked behind his spine. Carefully he brought her down.

"Matt, m'darlin', m'love."

"No, Mousie, not here."

"Aye, here," she snapped as he lowered her to the floor of the cavern. "Where else but here?"

"But you've never—"

"I'm ready."

She was not thrusting and demanding. She was female in her heart, in her being, not some creature de-sexed by the nature of work, by the coarse years of labour in the pit. Matt saw that he need not pity her at all. Under the shell was a girl who needed him as Anna had never done, not out of weakness but out of love. This was her rose garden, the bottom of a coal pit was her bower. Where else would he take her? He lowered her to the floor and lifted her skirts. She stared up at him, showing no apprehension. She tore at the buttons and the ragged ribbon that fastened her bodice, drew the garment apart to show him her breasts. Matt unlooped the cloth from his waist and knelt before her. The grime that smeared his torso and chest made his loins seem pale and doubly naked. He was aroused, and not ashamed. He wanted her to fear him just a little so that he might comfort her. He kissed her mouth. He touched her breasts with his fingertips He put his lips to each nipple in turn, tugging and teasing them, feeling them stiffen and thicken. Slipping an arm about her he lifted her to him. He did not impose himself, let Mouse probe until she found his manhood and joined with it. He lifted her higher. Her mouth gaped. She gave a soft swooning sort of cry Still he did not press He let her rest, then felt her surge against him. Her knees clasped his hips. She was wet and soft around him. Only then did he lean into her. She cried out, not like the sound that Anna made or the false passion uttered by girls from the gutters of the Babylon. There was no falseness in Mouse, no resentment. He put his head down, lips parted over her open mouth and shared his breath with her as they rode to a climax

Matt heard nothing, Mouse nothing.

Far away, beyond the band of millstone grit the sound of trickling sand was lost to the couple on the cavern floor.

• • •

For three hours Davy had waited, seated on a stump by the side of the carpenters' shed, shivering as shadows grew long and the autumn sun sank away down river.

If it had been impulse that had taken him there then i would have cooled too in the waiting time. But Davy had steeled himself, convinced that it was his duty to betray the family for the good of the pit.

It was close to four o'clock when he at last spied Thomas Rance. The oversman emerged from the counting-house and set off across the angle of the yard towards the shaft. It would be drawing-up time soon, Davy realised, and Mr Rance would not have much time to spare to hear a crippled lad's fancifu tale.

He must be firm and convincing.

"Mr Rance," he called out, and scrambled to his feet.

Thomas Rance turned his head.

"Mr Rance." Davy swallowed and beckoned. "A word wi you, Mr Rance."

It was how Matt would have put it. He felt pleased with himself. His confidence grew. He made the oversman come to him, did not scuttle and creep like a damned putter o rope-boy.

Mr Rance had no expression on his face. That blanknes had disconcerted better and bigger men than Davy Bennet. Davy breathed through his mouth, the evening air going down into his lungs as thick and cold as milk on a winter's morning. He must not splutter, cough, must say it straight out.

Mr Rance stopped five or ten feet from him.

"What's wrong with you, Bennet? Are you in need of help?"

"I know where's a seam," said Davy.

Thomas Rance could not prevent a frown of incomprehension furrowing his brow. He came closer. "What's that y say?"

"A seam, a new seam, a new winnin'."

"What do you know about seams?"

"Daddy found it," said Davy.

He experienced no relief at being rid of the secret.

Thomas Rance put out a hand and clamped it on hi shoulder.

"In the base seam?"

He had been believed. Mr Rance had not doubted him.

Davy nodded.

Mr Rance said, "Beyond the room?"

Davy nodded again.

"I've been down there on the dead night," said Thomas Rance. "There is no extension to the old seam."

"There is. Damned if there isn't. It's hid. Hid behind a door, a wooden door under the back mound."

"Who put the door there?"

"Daddy."

"Is that why his take was so high?"

"Aye. It would've been higher too if he'd laboured harder. It's a bloody rich store o' coal, Mr Rance."

"Is that where he met wi' his accident, in the new seam?"

"Aye. We brought him out."

"Who did?"

"Mrs Patterson, me an' Mouse."

"Christ!" said Thomas Rance. "Why, in God's name, did you still keep the seam to yourselves?"

"We promised Daddy we would."

"Who excavated the seam?"

"It took none," said Davy. "It's a – a nat'ral fault."

Thomas Rance shook his head. "No, there are no natural faults at that depth. It must be an old diggin', neglected an' forgotten."

"I've bloody *seen* it. I've cut bloody coal out o' it. It's a fault, like a cavern, I tell ye. Under a slab o' millstone."

"Is the man, Shearer, is he cuttin' there now?"

"Damned if he's not," said Davy. "The bastard."

"I should have known it," said Thomas Rance. "How could a sailor hew coal at that rate wi'out experience? I should've guessed it."

"I'll tak' ye down there," said Davy. "I'll show y' where it is."

"It canna be hard to find, Bennet, since there's no road at that level."

"I'll tak' ye down when they all come up at shift's end."

"Why are you doin' this?"

"I want t' cut."

"I see," said Thomas Rance. "It's *your* seam, is it?"

The oversman did not remind him that he was too puny to hew coal, too burned out with the black spit in his lungs to descend into the seams. The oversman put his big hands on his thighs and brought his face close to that of the boy.

"You want Mr Bolderon's bounty, is that it?" he whispered.

"I want t' bloody *cut*. I want *work*."

Whispering still, Thomas Rance said, "Ten pounds, Davy, that's all you're entitled to."

"What am I needin' wi' ten pounds?"

"Be that as it may, Davy," Thomas Rance said, "now you've told me it's no longer a secret, your secret. I'll be obliged to report it t' Mr Bolderon."

"I – I might have told ye a lie," said Davy. "See it first."

"Ah!" said Thomas Rance. "Ah-hah!"

"I'll show ye the door, the way in. I'll tak' ye down."

"It's not a lie, Davy, is it?"

"Nah."

"But why tell me at all, Davy?"

Now that it was done, Davy had no answer to the oversman's question. He could not explain it. Nobody could explain it. No one would ever know why.

Thomas Rance said, "Wait for me in the forge, Davy. Keep warm by the fire. Tell Mr Cameron I sent you."

"What – what'll ye do?"

"We'll go down, Davy, as you suggest, when shift's over an' the levels are cleared."

"You an' me, Mr Rance?"

"Just you an' me, Davy," Thomas Rance assured him.

Elspeth returned late from the counting-house. It was a dry clear night for once. She had not needed to change her shoes to cross the field but had picked her way to the cottage straight and quick. She was not thinking of Davy or of Mouse and Matt, but of the news that Keir Bolderon had given her that Snippets would return to claim his desk on Monday morning and that in future she would be answerable to the paymaster not the manager.

Keir Bolderon had imparted the information with many expressions of regret. He had assured her that, if it had been left to him, he would have paid Snippets off and kept her close by him. In the course of the day he had made one or two remarks whose implication Elspeth could not fail to understand. She felt sure that Keir Bolderon would soon make a proposal. She was not dismayed at the prospect, only by the fact that she must refuse it without explanation.

How could she tell him that she was wife to another man? Marriage was impossible. Not only had she her own horrid secret to protect but she was also obligated to Matt, must on no account bring the light of attention upon him. Matt's very life depended on her silence.

When she reached the cottage, however, Elspeth's anxiety about her own predicament was replaced by worry of a different kind.

Mouse and Matt were alone there. The girl was seated boldly upon Matt's knee, flushed and smug. Matt, in contrast, seemed embarrassed.

It dawned upon Elspeth that Matt Sinclair had not changed. He had taken advantage of Mouse or intended to do so very soon.

"What is this?" she demanded.

"What it seems t' be," said Matt.

"When did—"

"Matt's mine," Mouse said.

Still dirty from the day's work, she draped an arm about the man's neck and kissed him brazenly.

Matt disentangled himself. "It – it just happened, 'Pet."

At a loss, Elspeth looked round.

There was no pot upon the fire and the fire itself had not been raked and set but burned low and smoky in the hearth. Potatoes had not been scrubbed. The ham-bone she had put in a bowl of water to make stock had not been simmered. Nothing at all had been done that day, and Mouse and Matt seemed so wrapped up in this new-found 'love' that they had neglected—

Elspeth took hold of herself.

"Where's Sarah?"

"No' in yet," said Matt.

"An' Davy?"

Mouse shrugged. She tried to buss the man again but this time, gently, he turned his head aside. "Aye, where *is* Davy?"

Matt put his hands around Mouse's waist, lifted her lightly from his lap and got up.

"'Pet, we never meant—" he began.

"Has nobody thought t' fetch Mary Jean?" Elspeth angrily demanded.

"I expect Sarah's gone for her. They'll be here in a minute or two," said Matt. "'Pet, listen t' me. About my intentions—"

Now that she thought of it, she had seen signs of the attraction between the pit-girl and her brother-in-law. She should have remonstrated with him before now, should not have ignored it. In her confusion Elspeth managed to blot out that problem. She concentrated on the lateness of the hour, Davy's absence and why it was that Sarah had not returned with Mary Jean.

Matt said, "If it's Mary Jean that's got ye worried, I'll toddle down—"

Elspeth rounded on him. "How long have you been here?"

Matt shrugged. "A quarter-hour; a half, perhaps."

"Did you not *think*, Matt?"

"Ach, Davy'll just be sulkin'," said Mouse.

She went to the hearth and rattled the iron among ashy coals. It would be an hour or more before the fire would be hot enough to boil a pot of any kind.

Elspeth snapped, "Did it not occur t'you that Davy has not been out alone after dark for months?"

"I'll awa' an' find him," said Matt. "Mousie, my love, why do you not go down to the minder's an' make sure Mary Jean's safe? I expect you'll meet Sarah on the way." He looked at Elspeth. "Will that calm y' down, 'Pet?"

Elspeth said, "What happened today?"

She did not know why she should make a relationship between exploration of the fissure in the rock and the unusual events of the evening. For an instant Matt was bewildered. He frowned. "Eh?"

"Did you break through – in the seam?"

"We did, aye, we did," said Matt.

"Is it another cavern?"

"Aye." Mouse chuckled. "Packed wi' coal too, Elspeth."

"Did you go into it?"

"Mouse saw it," said Matt. "But, look, we can talk o' this later. I'm starved an' in sore need o' supper. Once we've found the missin' lambs an' boiled the pots we'll tell ye all about it, 'Pet."

"Yes."

"Mousie, off an' fetch Mary Jean."

"Aye, Matt." She discarded the iron poker and rose with alacrity, beaming at him.

Mouse made towards the door but did not do more than reach her hand to the latch when the door opened suddenly and Sarah, white-faced and breathless, burst into the kitchen.

"Where's Mary Jean?" Elspeth cried.

Clinging to the door handle, Sarah shook her head.

"It's – it's – Davy," she panted. "I – I've just seen him at the shaft wi' Mr Rance."

"Rance?" Mouse put a hand to her sister's neck and cocked the younger girl's head up. "What's Davy doin' wi' Thomas Rance?"

"Takin' him below," Sarah answered.

"Christ! Davy's shopped us," Matt said and, grabbing at his coat, ran out of the cottage like a hare.

The horsemen and the winding operator, a young man named Imrie, had been none too pleased to be told to remain at their posts. They had no choice but to obey the oversman, however. Grumbling, they had let down the bucket and left the horses coupled to the gear twenty minutes after the time when the pit was cleared. Even Elginbrod had come up and gone home. Mr Rance wore such a dour expression, however, that none dare argue or complain; and they had done no more than mutter questions as to what the oversman might be up to, dragging the Bennet boy, and him a cripple, down below at this dead hour.

Imrie was even less pleased, some thirty minutes later, to be roused from nodding half-sleep in his upright box near the shaft head by a violent hand upon his throat.

In the glimmer of the lantern he recognised his assailant as the bloody sailorman. Shearer was twice his size and as mad as a baited bull. His eyes fair blazed and there was spittle upon the corners of his lips. He seemed to have lost all hi reason, though there was no reek of spirits upon his breat when he dragged Imrie from his stool and thrust his face clos to the winder's.

"Did bloody Rance go down?"

"Aye, aye."

"Wi' our Davy?"

"Ben – Bennet, aye."

"Who else?"

"No – nobody."

"Right, then." The hand slackened. Gagging a little, Imri sagged against the side of the box. "Shout the horses an' brin up yon bloody bucket."

"Wha –wha—"

"Now."

Fearing for his life, Imrie thrust his head from the apertur in the side of the box and called out to the horsemen in thei big low-roofed hut twenty yards away. He could see the spa of the rope slack across the sky, was too conscious of Sheare behind him, crowding him, to dare issue warning to his companions.

He croaked, "Take up the bucket."

"Louder, damn you."

"TAKE UP THE BUCKET."

After a moment or two the rope stiffened and the roller c the drum began to rotate, the wheels to churn in their capping of black blubber.

Shearer gave Imrie no opportunity to sound an alarm bu he did not bully the winder again. Indeed, now that his wi was being done he seemed quite reasonable and rational.

As the bucket came up from the bottom of the shaft he saic "I'm goin' down too. Mr Rance expects me t' be there at th bottom but I nippit home for a bite first. See?"

"What's he doin' wi' Bennet?"

"We're – we're lookin' for a new seam. Davy Bennet think he remembers the line."

"Ah-hah!" Imrie was not convinced.

He was even less convinced when the Bennet lassie and Mr Patterson appeared across the yard. The girl was barefoot bu the widow had taken time to toss a shawl over her shoulders though she still wore the neat plaid frock that she affected when she paid wages.

"Matt," Elspeth called. "*Has* Davy gone down?"

"Aye, with Rance."

"What can we do?"

"Brazen it out."

"Matt, are you certain Davy's—"

"Why else would he take Rance below?"

"But why would he do such a thing?"

Matt made a sound of frustration, half groan, half roar. "How would I know what rattles in Davy's head?"

Cowering by Matt's side, Mouse said, "Are ye goin' after them, Matt?"

"Aye, though I fear it'll do no good."

"I'll come wi' you."

"Nah, Mousie. It'll be enough if I'm there."

"But it's my bloody seam, dearest," Mouse said.

"'Pet, hold her back," said Matt curtly.

He wasted no more time. The moment the bucket swayed level with the platform he leapt into it. He reached and caught the uprights to steady the contraption, and shouted, "*Lower awa'.*"

Imrie glanced at Elspeth. He had respect for her. She was Mr Bolderon's depute and, as far as he knew, his sweetheart. She did not contradict the sailorman. Strictly, no man was supposed to descend into the pit after shift hours without a direct order from Mr Rance. Imrie hesitated then stuck his head from the box and called to the horsemen.

"SLACK OUT."

Elspeth clasped Mouse to her. Mouse squirmed in her grasp but the woman held her very tightly and would not let her go.

Mouse Bennet screamed, "*Maaatt, Maaaaaatt—*"

Arm raised, Matt gave the girl-child a punched salute, a farewell, and sank out of sight below the platform's rim.

TEN

Footsteps of the Flock

Davy was a bantam cock again, small and swaggering. He had his triumph and his power as he led the oversman into the trap and assisted him down the steps as proudly as if he had carved out the seam with his own bare hands.

“See,” he declared, swinging the hot lantern about.

Thomas Rance had laboured along the tunnels not at one with the earth this evening, not with Davy Bennet scuttling along before him and the weight of his responsibilities dragging on his back like a sack.

The door was hidden, but not well hidden, behind a mound of loose marl. He glanced at Jock Bennet's old room in passing and saw that there had been no coal cut from it in weeks When the door was exposed and taken from the trap and Davy had climbed expertly into the space Thomas Rance hesitated for a moment. All his pitman's senses were afire. He could hear an empty silence that indicated space. He could smell coal in his nostrils, taste the atomised dust of a day's cut, could taste and smell other minerals too. Air was not especially scarce. The lantern flame did not pale or stifle. He pushed his bulk through the trap and went down the four short steps into the cavern.

Coal by the ton-weight hung on the walls but it was the glittering slab that caught his attention; millstone grit, without doubt. He was astonished to find a slab of such scale and density at this depth and its presence disturbed him. It was not a sinister instinct that told the oversman there was something amiss in the cavern's construction, a mystery and a puzzle of Nature. He understood the physical forces that had formed the seams and levels of the place called the Abbeyfield the ice and snow-rivers, the quakes and great alluvial washes

Davy Bennet danced about, swinging the lantern. “See, do y' see, Mr Rance? I told ye, did I not? Coal an' more bloody coal. Damn me, it's coal wi'out end."

The lad's estimate was an exaggeration. The fore-cavern was certainly not scarce of coal – coal of fine quality at that – but it was limited. Two young hewers could skin it out, Thomas Rance suspected, in a six month, though he could not judge the depth of the seam. He noticed that Bennet or Shearer, perhaps, had peeled the stuff to the rock here and there. All in all the formation was strange. Thomas Rance advanced cautiously along the cavern's narrow floor.

Great ribs of coal lay broken on the floor, ready for transportation; a whole week's take ready to be loaded on the sleds. You could see where Bennet and Shearer had set the candles, mark out their progress along the seam by the smoke-smuts. He had never, ever, seen such a place. It amazed him that he could stand tall in it and that an arm stretched out would not quite express its width.

Davy Bennet tugged at his sleeve.

"They were lookin' on t'day, Mr Rance. Mousie an' him. they found more; a whole seam, Mousie said. A line, a run, a bran' new cut. Up there, I think. Aye, up there."

"How long since your father discovered this seam?"

"Last year, last spring."

Last spring there had been hope for Mr Bolderon's contract. Now it would be Fotheringham and the new partner, whoever he might be, who would reap the benefit of the discovery. Bennet's selfishness had ruined the best manager he had ever worked under, a man who had sympathy for his colliers and who considered himself one with them.

Anger spurted in the breast of the stoical oversman, anger at Jock Bennet, at Elspeth Patterson whose hypocrisy seemed more heinous than that of the dead hewer or even the sailorman.

Men might be expected to bow to greed, mixed in with pride. But she, the Patterson woman, she must have known what straits and circumstances fettered Mr Bolderon, she more than anyone these past few months. Why had she kept lip-tight about the existence of this seam, this saving discovery? Was this a form of selfishness too subtle for him to understand? Did she, perhaps, require Mr Bolderon reduced before she would consider herself good enough to marry him, for that was what was on the manager's mind, plain as a pitpost. Such thoughts, unrelated to coal, skipped and skittered about in Thomas Rance's mind as he picked his way over the fallen coal, following the lad and the lantern along to the fissure's narrowing.

"Up there, see." Davy pointed.

Shearer had left a little timber ladder conveniently in place and had banged in a cross brace high up between the converging walls. Crumbled coal had spilled down the smooth wall.

"See it," Davy Bennet whispered. "Yonder's where Mousie went through."

Thomas Rance took off his coat. He folded the garment neatly and laid it on the floor and, as he did so, bent and examined the constitution of the elements there. A strange grey sort of sand; he rubbed it in his fingers. It did not adhere to his skin. He sniffed it. It smelled slightly like gunpowder, though not so pungent. Sand, an unusual sand. He blew it from his fingertips, wiped them on his shirt then said, "Give me the lantern, Davy."

The boy was agog. Gradually his brashness and bravado had been diminished by the place itself, by the realisation that he had sided with an oversman. He was in awe of the authority of Mr Rance now and the quiet assurance of the man so different from that of his father. Meekly he handed over the lantern.

Standing close to the boy Thomas Rance said solemnly, "You did the right thing, Davy."

"He would've ruinit it," Davy murmured. "He would've took it all, left me wi' nothin'."

"Step back a pace, Davy," said Thomas Rance.

Now that he was clad in shirt-sleeves Mr Rance's bulk was evident. His arms were thickly muscled and his chest, though sprigged with grey hair, was as broad as that of Matt Shearer. Why, Davy wondered, had he not noticed the oversman's strength before?

"Are y' goin' up there, Mr Rance?"

"I am, Davy. Step back further, lad."

Again Davy retreated. His heels clipped the coal ridge and he tripped. He stuck out his hand and bruised it and sat down pon the ridge and, sucking his palm, watched as Thomas ance clambered up to the beam with the lantern wire lenched in his teeth. Davy had no part in it. From that noment it was none of Davy Bennet's doing, though that fact vent unrecorded and undiscovered.

Thomas Rance leaned over the crossbeam. Still with the antern wire in his teeth, its barrel hot against his chest, he eered into the crevice that Matt Shearer had enlarged that fternoon. Thomas Rance could smell the same smell as Mouse ad done, a whiff from ages past. He heard too a weird, dry rickling sound, like sand in an hourglass.

“What the devil!” he whispered.

Thomas Rance did not doubt that there was space, vast pace, beyond the Bennets' cavern. He could sense it with very fibre of his being. Leaving the lantern balanced on the rossbeam, he came down from the perch, found a mallet, rods nd wedges, tucked them into his leather belt and, without a vord to Davy, climbed up to the crevice once more.

Wheezing slightly, Davy watched.

It happened very suddenly.

It was as if the hoary old tales of egg-shell rock had been rue all along. Though the river bed was far off the channel which the flood had gouged out a hundred thousand years ago vas not so distant. It had been filled grain by insidious grain n some far-off eon, the long hollows left by melting ice had een packed under pressure. Fire and flood, the earth's hot assions, might all be spent but the debris remained locked elow, the ashes of its energy preserved.

To test the depth of the coal seam Thomas Rance inserted a rod into the groove that Matt had gouged out. When the rod met resistance the oversman gave it a whack with the mallet, one cautious jabbing blow. Sand spurted into his face. Sand fell over his chest like a shower of dry water. Sand blinded Thomas Rance. He swung away, slipped and clung desperately to the beam with one hand. Sand hissed and pattered over Davy who flung himself backward and scrambled over the coal towards the trap.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the flow of sand stopped.

Thomas Rance dragged himself on to the beam. He rubbed sand from his eyes, spat, and with his face close to the iron examined the point at which the rod had run through. He hesitated, gripped the rod and began to screw it out, inch by inch.

No gradual thunder warned man or boy. The crack was as sudden and sharp as a musket shot. The millstone slab shifted its precarious position and its edge found no support. More tiny grains poured fom the outrun. The slab crunched down and split across its breadth. The lantern and Thomas Rance were instantly lost. Sand that had remained locked in long chambers for a hundred thousand years came forth in a hissing deluge, overwhelmed the man and buried him in a breath Davy, a moment in the dark, cried out for his daddy before he too was buried. Uncountable quantities of sand swarmed into the worm-holes of the Abbeyfield and slithered with astonishing rapidity along the tunnels.

Deep along the river-shore rocks shifted.

Mr Nicol was putting up his shutter when the cobbles trembled. The shutter dropped from his grasp and clattered to the ground and the shopkeeper stepped back in amazement as his hams and puddings swayed and danced on their hooks and lamps and lanterns chattered on his shelves. Behind him the bell in the tower clanked once, then twice, and then was silent.

In the back room of the Grapes Mrs Figgens was uncorking bottles when all the glassware came alive and kegs grumbled on their trestles. She dropped the screw, flung her apron over her head and shrieked in terror, believing that Judgement Day had come at last and that God was after publicans.

On the keel-boat *Matchless*, ploughing from Alloa to Leith Georgie Haynes felt the heave of a huge wave. He supposed that it was naught but a freak of the equinox or a squall that stroked up the waters of the Forth and did not even glance back at Placket's night-shrouded shore.

Hector Fotheringham had caught his wife as she dressed for supper and, at the precise moment of the disaster, had been pandering with her in the big four-poster. He was caught between passion and curiosity and had to strike the woman under him to make her let him go. He tore from her, bruising her white arms, and threw open the casement and leaned out just as a second tremor disturbed, if only slightly, the solid foundations of the Priory.

Mr Fotheringham realised that an accident had occurred. e thought it might be fire and explosion, collapse of tunnels nadequately shored. Even at that moment the heritor of lacket wrote off the field's income and felt relieved that he ad so little capital invested in it and would survive the isfortune no matter how bad it turned out to be.

Behind her husband, by the side of the rumpled bed, knelt argaret. Half-naked and sprinkled with sexual sweat, she rayed to God to save her from the retribution that might nminently descend upon the wicked colliers, the punishment ue to brute beasts who laboured for a living, not to ladies nd fine gentlemen who paid their kirk tithes and unfailingly raised His Name from their private pew in Placket kirk.

Keir Bolderon had barely reached his house when the tremor attled the china plates and cutlery on the table. Dorrith yelled nd released the soup bowl which shattered on the flags and pread a great welter of broth across the kitchen. Keir Bolderon tood quite still, still clad in coat and hat, until the vibrations eased; then he turned and ran to remount his horse and ride s fast as the creature could manage back to the pit shaft.

In the fields that flanked the Rutherford burn doors were pening in cottages and shacks. Colliers, their wives and hildren came pouring out, except those who had hidden under eds or blankets or who had suffered some minor cut or burn y the shaking of their homes.

At the pithead the horses which had trudged the circular oute all day long and had an extra hour added to the drag, hied and sheared at their leathers and turned so fierce for a inute or two that it was all the horsemen could do to bridle hem and prevent them wrenching the wheel from its axle and reaking the rope.

Mouse and Elspeth, loitering by the shaft head, heard more than a supernatural rumble, felt more than a shaking of the earth. They could hear a sigh, a roaring suspiration deep below and felt the wind that draughted upward, whirling, from the shaft. They fell to the ground, Elspeth covering the girl-child with her body, as if the pit had turned volcanic and would spew forth molten rock at any instant.

There at the exit the noises were more prolonged and magnified, the upward thrust of wind sustained. Grains and granules pattered like rain about the women and peppered th rooftops of the sheds. The rope came alive, snapping an whipping as if some gigantic thing had grasped the bucket lik bait and sought to worry it loose. Beneath Elspeth, Mous uttered not a sound, not even a whimper, until men began t arrive from the cottages. Even then the girl-child said nothin did not stir, for the menfolk were also afraid and came n closer than the gable of the shed, all tense and leaning awa as if about to flee. It was Elspeth who got to her feet and, no that the flurry of wind had diminished, walked towards th platform. Mouse rose to her knees, arms spread, watchin Elspeth step on to the platform.

The sounds had grown, if anything, louder. Elspeth coul hear the snap of ladders, the low-pitched rumble of collapsin columns and that all-devouring hiss like the serpent of he dreams.

She had no doubt at all that the river's hidden channel ha been breached and peered down into the darkness in searc of water. She saw, of course, nothing at all. She frowne stepped down from the platform and returned to the plac where Mouse knelt.

"What is it? What's happenin'?"

"Floodin', I think," said Elspeth. "Somebody run for M Bolderon. Go on, somebody fetch the manager."

Two of the Leach boys turned and ran at her comman sprinting away into the darkness of the hedges and trees th bordered the back road. More colliers, including women, fille the avenues between the buildings. They were silent, stru dumb by the sounds that rolled out of the shaft mouth, by t faint but perceptible quivering of the ground beneath the feet.

"It's flood, aye," somebody declared. "We'll need t' g awa' before it wells out o' there an' swamps the fields."

"Will it do that, Billy?"

"Will it no'."

"Aye, yon's the river, the river comin' through the seams

"Oh God! God save us all!"

Elspeth stood her ground, a hand on Mouse's shoulder. S was waiting for Keir Bolderon, she realised, in the ridiculo hope that he would offer a solution, that he would someho escue Davy, Matt and Thomas Rance, that all was not ruined fter all. She watched the colliers retreat, some in sudden anic, others reluctantly.

Within minutes she was alone again, alone with Mousie, vaiting for the man to come.

Elspeth was relieved when Keir Bolderon galloped into the yard a few minutes later. He drew up, dismounted and tossed he reins to one of the colliers.

"Take her to the stable, Anderson. Malone, tell the horsemen to bring out a fresh pair. You," he turned on a small swarthy hewer, "take word to the cottages. I want the houses cleared. Every man, woman and child. Tell them to collect their best belongings and go down to the village. Shelter will be arranged for them. I want a safety crew assembled in the counting-house in a quarter of an hour."

Peeling off his coat he strode towards Elspeth.

"What are you doing here, Mrs Patterson? I suggest you get away home an' collect the family an' make haste out of the Abbeyfield. The ground's riddled with the tunnels of old workings. I fear there may be a collapse if the flooding is severe."

"It – it started in our room, Mr Bolderon."

"Your room? At the base level? How can you be sure?"

"Davy – our Davy – he took Mr Rance down to show him a secret seam."

"Secret seam? What secret seam?"

"There's a long seam lyin' under millstone. Jock Bennet discovered it. We've been workin' it ever since."

"God in Heaven! Why did you not tell me, Elspeth?"

"Jock Bennet would not let me."

"After he died?"

Elspeth shook her head. She was ashamed of her greed now, her selfishness. The accident, the flood seemed so connected to that original act that it might all have been her fault.

"Matt's down there too," said Mouse, whispering

"Did the sailor go with Rance an' the boy?"

"He followed after them."

"When did Rance go down? At shift's end?"

"Yes."

"So we must assume that Mr Rance broke through a baffler wall an' let in a flood of water. If that's the case – and he and the boy were caught on the bottom –" Keir Bolderon shook his head.

Mouse looked up at Elspeth, sought her hand. The girl-child's fingers were icy. "Is – is Matt – gone?"

"We can't be sure, Mouse."

Elspeth did not dare offer more hope than that, or more consolation.

"I'll speak with you afterwards, Elspeth," said Keir Bolderon sternly. "I've much to do here, meanwhile."

She watched him stride away. The men had separated themselves from their women. Across the edge of the field lanterns showed, bobbing along the path to the roadway. Some households had already begun to trail towards the village. It was, Elspeth realised, only a precaution. She could not imagine that the earth would open up and swallow the community whole. On the other hand she had read of subsidence on other pit fields. Mr Bolderon would not want to risk a loss of life. In one way the colliers of the Abbeyfield had been lucky. If the breakthrough had occurred during daylight hours then the loss of life would have been considerable.

Thomas Rance and Davy were dead. Keir was correct; there was no hope for them. But Matt – she clung to a faint fond hope that somehow Matt had escaped.

Elspeth drew Mouse away. The girl was strangely silent There were no hysterical outbursts, no tears. She was pinch-lipped, white-faced and trembling but she had learned to hold in her suffering as a woman must do in the passage from girlhood to maturity.

"Come, Allison," Elspeth said. "We'd best leave it to the hewers. They know what t' do."

"Matt . . . ?"

"Mr Bolderon will bring Matt out."

"He'll come back t' me, won't he?"

"Yes," said Elspeth.

"Matt'll no' desert me. Matt loves me, so he does."

"Allison, we'll have to find Sarah an' Mary Jean, get away from the cottage."

"Aye," said the girl, with a nod, and led the way through he sheds towards the field gate. "Matt'll find me, never fear."

Keir Bolderon waited one hour. All sounds had ceased. The haft was as still as he had ever heard it.

Through the night air he could hear the voices of the colliers as they wended down, still, to Placket. In the counting-house he long trestles that usually supported money tonight held charts of the workings. He pored over them in company with he six-man crew of safety and rescue workers. Thomas Rance would have been the leader of this group but it was to 'rescue' Thomas Rance that the men had been assembled. It was also to determine what event had occurred below ground and how extensive the damage to the workings had been, to learn if coal could be safely drawn from any part of the pit within the week.

Though he worked efficiently, Keir Bolderon had a soft sickness in his heart. Elspeth had cheated him. She had sustained a lie throughout the months of their friendship, even after he had promoted her, after the earning from the 'secret seam' had become inconsequential.

It was not the first time that a hewer had found a pocket of great coal and kept the knowledge of it to himself, risking dismissal if his cache was discovered. Keir Bolderon was puzzled by the location of Bennet's cavern, however, for at that depth and in that strata pressure invariably squeezed out all air spaces.

It was an hour after the tremor before Mr Fotheringham put in an appearance. He came down in a gig driven by a servant and was inappropriately dressed in fawn-coloured velvet and a hat with a blackcock's feather in the band. He came to the counting-house and strode in, striking awe in the men there and causing them to pause in the laying out of their equipment.

Mr Fotheringham demanded to be told what had occurred in his pit. Mr Fotheringham demanded to be told what Mr Bolderon intended to do about it. Mr Bolderon informed Mr Fotheringham that he intended to put himself into the bucket – if the bucket could be retrieved from the shaft bottom – and go down, alone, to the first level and take evidence with his own eyes. Mr Fotheringham shouted at Mr Bolderon. Mr

Bolderon shouted at Mr Fotheringham – and the owner of the pit strode off again, hurling back the command that news be brought to him at his home as soon as it was known.

Ten minutes later Keir Bolderon stood on the rim of the main shaft dressed in a tight canvas jacket and with a coal-heaver's lacquered straw hat upon his head. He had a pick in one hand a masked lantern in the other, its copper wire glowing orange and strange. A weighted rope had already been dropped down the main shaft, another down the Dead Man. Both had been brought up dry. There was no odour of water, that dankness which would have confirmed flood. And there was, of course no response to the calling out of names.

"Rance, Rance. Are ye there, man?"

"Davy Bennet. Can ye hear us?"

"Shearer, what say ye?"

The bucket was hoisted slowly. On its arrival at the surface it showed no evidence of moisture or of bruising. It seemed unaltered except for a coating of fine grey grit blown into its weave. By the light of the orange lamp Mr Bolderon inspected the dust, tasted it with a wetted fingertip, found it salty. It did not dissolve upon his tongue, however, and he spat it out quickly, shuddering as if it was alum. He stepped into the bucket and was lowered into the depths, into smothered silence and darkness.

A half-hour later Mr Bolderon's signal was received. The emergency winding-box attendant shouted to the horsemen and the bucket was hauled upwards once more.

Mr Bolderon, pale and perspiring, climbed out.

The hewers were around him instantly – Anderson, Malone, McQueen, Dodd – clamouring to be told what he had found, what sort of state the accident had left, and would there be work for them again here on the Abbeyfield. None asked if he had found Thomas Rance, the Bennet lad, the sailorman.

Mr Bolderon moved away from the shaft and did not look back.

He said, "Have the carpenters build a lid. Put it on an' seal it. Rope off the shaft platform. Do the same at the Dead Man."

"Mr Bolderon, Mr Bolderon, what's happened?"

"The workings are filled with sand."

"*Sand!* Jesus an' Joseph!"

"It lies up to the middle of the second level an', so far as I can see, fills the main roads as well as the secondary. There's nothin' there but sand, lads. The Abbeyfield's drowned."

"An' the work?"

"No work," said Keir Bolderon and, bracing himself, headed for the stables to find his horse.

Mary Jean was fast asleep. Elspeth's arms ached and she had a pain across her shoulders that would not be eased. She sat against the boxes, their 'precious possessions' brought up from the cottage to the inn yard, with a blanket over her knees. Mouse was to one side of her, curled up small, her thumb in her mouth, her eyes wide open. Sarah was on the other; just the four of them now, all that was left of the family.

Within the inn Mrs Figgens was doing a roaring trade in beer, whisky and gin, selling to those to whom uncertainty gave an appetite a wheen of pies and salted fish. The long low building was rowdy and restless like a fair or festival, for there were no corpses to retrieve and no girning widows to console, except the Patterson woman and the Bennets and they hardly counted.

The import of what had happened on the Abbeyfield was discussed hither and thither among jugs and tankards. Roused from their evening chores and chased out of their homes, girls delighted in the novelty and were strumpeting about and flirting with no thought for what tomorrow might bring. One or two of the old wives approached Elspeth, asked a question, offered a word of sympathy and told her of their own sad losses down the years.

Mouse listened without a word. She had drunk a glass of sour milk which somebody had brought her and was sick at once upon the grass. She had put her thumb back into her mouth and, paler and smaller than ever, clung tightly to Elspeth thereafter.

Mouse had not confessed that she had been loved by Matt Shearer. She wondered if she might be carrying his bairn and, in her numbness, speculated on whether it would be boy or girl and whether it would die and leave her as Daddy had done, and Davy, and Matt.

Sarah whispered, "Is Davy lost down there?"

Elspeth answered, "It seems so."

Sarah whispered, "In our seam?"

Elspeth answered, "Yes. Now *ssshhh*, dear, please."

It was not long by the hours of the clock, not much after ten in fact, when Keir Bolderon appeared at the Grapes. He tethered his horse in front of the inn and came through the throng, brushing aside intemperate questions and ignoring the hands that pulled at his sleeves. Whatever news he had for them would be delivered to the assembled workforce in the yard tomorrow morning. He would tell them then that the pit was closed. He would see them paid to the day, to the last earned penny. He would give them all a week rent free in the cottages, and argue for this gesture of charity with Mr Fotheringham. In due course he would send down his best crew to redeem transportable gear from the upper level. But he had seen with his own eyes how deep the sand lay and knew that all the neuks and crannies of the coal seams would be filled with it.

Sand could not be shifted. Fires might burn out, water might be pumped away, but sand remained for ever. The Abbeyfield's life as a producing pit was finished.

"Ah! There you are, Mrs Patterson," Keir Bolderon said with brittle cheerfulness.

Mouse looked up, removed her thumb from her mouth. "Did ye find Matt for me?"

Taken aback, Mr Bolderon had no answer for the girl. He appealed mutely to Elspeth with a little spreading of his hands. He was streaked with coal dirt and unkempt, looked coarser than she had ever seen him. Slipping Mary Jean from her lap into Sarah's care Elspeth got to her feet.

"Is there any hope, Mr Bolderon?"

"None, I regret to say."

"Did you discover—"

The man shook his head. "They'll never be found. The Abbeyfield must be their restin' place."

"I've heard talk that it's sand that flooded the workings; is it true?"

"It is." Mr Bolderon drew Elspeth away. There was far too much interest in their talk from certain sections of the crowd across the yard. Even the women sprawled by the wall were vatching him intently enough to read the words upon his lips.

“A massive infestation of fine sand. It came, I suspect, from behind the seam that Bennet uncovered.”

“How could such a thing happen?”

“That we will never know, Elspeth. We can only speculate on the cause. Thomas Rance wouldn't be foolhardy enough to ight a charge of powder. He'd never blast in an unknown seam at that depth.”

“Is – is Matt Shearer lost too, do you think?”

“If he was below the second ladder, aye. It's a dreadful sight, believe me. Everything's crushed an' swallowed up. There's naught but a shoal of damned filthy stuff right to the middle part of the level.”

“What will happen to them?” Elspeth indicated the colliers, a little less rowdy since the manager's arrival, within the inn.

“They must uproot an' seek work elsewhere.”

“Is there nothin' here for them?”

“No, nothing.”

Elspeth drew in a deep, deep breath.

She said, “May we return home, to the cottage?”

“I see no reason why you should not,” said Keir Bolderon, and then checked himself. “Except – except that there will be strangers here by tomorrow.”

“Strangers?”

“Sheriff's officers, inspectors of this an' that.” Keir Bolderon looked her straight in the eye. “Men from the Press. The *Alloa Journal* will have a reporter in the saddle even now, I suspect.”

“Is it news, what's happened here?”

“News of a sort,” said Keir Bolderon. “It'll not have the value of a bloody disaster with hundreds lost but it is news enough for the chickens to scratch at.” He paused. “It would be as well if you made yourself scarce.”

Elspeth said, “Why? They'll not be interested in the likes o' me. I'm nothing, Mr Bolderon.”

“Companion to the deceased.”

“I was no more to Matt Sinclair than—”

“Sinclair?”

“To Matt Shearer—”

Keir Bolderon said, “Take the children to my house. Dorrith will find you beds.”

"I cannot do that, Mr Bolderon."

"What *will* you do?" he said. "Will you go back where you came from now?"

"No, I – I'll find somethin'."

"Elspeth," Keir Bolderon said, "I know who you are."

She stiffened.

He said, "I've known for some months. You're not from Ayr. You're from Balnesmoor in the Lennox. You are – or were – wife to a certain Mr James Moodie, a weaver."

"Oh, God!"

"That's who you are."

"Oh, God!"

He was very matter-of-fact, almost off-hand. "You see, we deceived each other, Elspeth. I could have given away your secret as easily as you kept the secret of the new winnings. It makes us level, does it not?"

"You *knew* and you didn't *tell* me."

Still in that tone of near-indifference, Keir Bolderon said, "I didn't do it to protect you. I did it because I hoped you might fall in love with me an' that you might marry me."

"But you *knew* that I was already a wife."

Keir Bolderon said, "A widow."

He caught her as she staggered.

Sarah started up, jostling Mary Jean, and even Mouse lifted her gaze for an instant. It seemed that Elspeth might swoon but she steadied herself, clutching Keir Bolderon's shoulder, his arm about her waist.

"Come to my house, Elspeth. Shelter there," said Keir Bolderon. "You an' the children will be safe in my house. Tomorrow, when you're rested, we'll talk more of it."

"Talk. *Talk now*. Is he dead? Is James *really* dead?"

"Months ago."

"And yet you said nothing?"

Flushing, Keir Bolderon shrugged. "I – I was in love with you. I didn't want you to leave, to lose you."

"What else have you kept from me?"

"Only that you are still being sought."

"James, my – my husband sought me. That's why I came here, hid here."

"No, your husband's no longer a threat. But there are lawyers, a lawyer who seeks you."

"A lawyer? Why?"

"Because your husband's sisters are most anxious to steal away your inheritance."

"I – I don't—"

"Your husband willed his wealth and property to you and your child." Keir Bolderon motioned towards Mary Jean who slept on the old blanket among the boxes. "It's a great deal of money, I believe."

"How long have you known?"

"Months."

"Who told on me?"

"Nobody. It came to my attention through an advertisement."

"You—" Elspeth swayed again but when Keir Bolderon reached out to support her she drew herself away from him. "You *schemed*, didn't you? You wanted my *money*, not me."

"That's true, was true. At first."

Elspeth looked wildly about her. Mouse, Sarah and Mary Jean huddled pathetically at her feet among their little heap of possessions. Colliers squinted at her from the doorway of the inn. Inside, a girl laughed, a shrill braying sound.

It was a cold Ocotober night in Placket on the borders of the Forth; Elspeth could not imagine what she was doing here. She felt as if she was awakening from a dream, that none of it had been real at all. Jock Bennet, Davy, even Matt – none of them had existed, had impinged upon her life except in a split second of time carved out of the night, the time between her flight from Balnesmoor and this moment when she learned that at last she was free of him, of his shame and his guilt and his secrets.

She clenched her fists by her sides and straightened her bowed shoulders. She confronted the manager as if he too was a phantom that had already begun to dissolve and vanish into the dark night air.

"I ask you again, Mr Bolderon, is my husband dead?"

"There's no doubt of it, no doubt."

"Mouse, Sarah, come with me."

Elspeth lifted Mary Jean into her arms and settled the child comfortably across her shoulder, head resting against her hair. She stooped and picked up the heaviest box in her left hand.

"No, please. No, I beg you," said Keir Bolderon. "I admit that I wronged you, Elspeth. But, please, I only wanted—"

"What did you want, Mr Bolderon?"

"My chance," Keir Bolderon said.

"You could never marry a pit girl," said Elspeth. "But by God, you could marry an heiress."

"Where are you going?"

"Home," said Elspeth Patterson Moodie and, without another word, led the girls through the inn yard and out on to the road.

But it was not over and she was not free of the Abbeyfield just yet. In fact she never would be quite free of it, for her time there had not been a dream but as real as her days with James, as real as that long-ago childhood on the green slopes of Drumglass with Gaddy and Coll and Anna. She was the sum of each phase and each had added to the total of the woman she had become.

The shock of Keir Bolderon's revelation had blinded Elspeth to the needs of the girls. Sarah and Mouse had suffered a dreadful loss. It was understandable that when they reached the road and she turned her face towards Stirling the Bennets should hang back. What they had was gone. Only the poor clothes and ribbons and silly tin trinkets in the box remained. The graves must be left behind, the mute elements of labour in the earth, claimed by the earth where Mammy and Daddy lay, and Davy too now, and Matt.

Once she cleared the vicinity of the Grapes Elspeth came quickly to her senses. She could hardly walk away unencumbered, forsaking Placket as she had come to it, with just a bundle and a bairn; hardly walk all the long road back to Stirling with two orphans clinging to her skirts. She stopped. Mouse was crying like a bairn. Even solemn Sarah had a quaver in her voice as she asked, "Are you leavin' us too, Elspeth?"

"No, I'm not leavin' you. I'll take you with me."

"Where? Where?" Mouse cried.

"To where I used to live. To Balnesmoor. It's pretty there, among green fields."

"Is there work?" said Sarah.

"Coal?" said Mousie. "Is there coal at Balnesmoor?"

"I've a house there," said Elspeth. "It's a large house wi` a kitchen an' five rooms."

"Why did y' leave it if it was so nice?" said Sarah.

"I'm no' goin'," said Mouse. "Matt'll need t' know where I am when he comes lookin'."

Elspeth paused, said, "Perhaps you're right, Mouse. In any case we can hardly travel in the dark. We're all tired. We'll need a night's rest first."

"Is it safe t' go back?" said Sarah.

"Quite safe," said Elspeth.

It was strange to cross the Rutherford bridge at that hour on that night. Dogs yapped in excitement about the field, turned loose in the time of danger, abandoned and cast out. In some windows lanterns glimmered, disguising the fact that the cottages were deserted. Over the pit, though, was a halo of light for the rescue crew had lit torches of pitch and coal-oil to illuminate their work. To Elspeth it seemed as if the trees had been set alight and burned in great streamers of yellow and black smoke without being consumed. Even Mary Jean wakened and peered out of sleepy eyes at the sight.

Sarah had been last away. She had closed the door carefully and put a block of wood against the step to cover a hole where rats might slip through. The block had been moved. The door had been opened. The lantern by the window had been taken away. Sarah tugged at Elspeth's sleeve.

"Somebody's there," she hissed. "Inside."

By now they were close to the cottage. Elspeth had all but given in to weariness. She longed to sit down, to put Mary Jean down and rest her aching back. But she saw that Sarah's alarm was genuine and caught at the child and pulled her back. She was too burdened, though, to stay Mouse.

With a cry Mousie dropped the boxes and ran.

"Matt. Matt's come back."

She flung herself against the door, so impatient and noisy in her joy that Elspeth's warning was lost.

Mouse burst into the kitchen.

A tunnel of wan light opened towards Elspeth and Sarah.

Sarah said, "Could it be our Davy?"

Elspeth said, "No."

A shriek from within drew them on. If there was danger or some horrid thing within then they must share it, for they were the survivors, the women of the tribe, and that was their role.

He had not been there long. He had put coals upon the fire but they were black still. He had filled the kettle and hung it on its hook. He had discarded his work clothes, draped a blanket about his naked body. He had found what food there was, a fist of roasted mutton, bannocks, a bowl of salted herrings and had been caught stuffing them into his mouth. He washed the mouthfuls down with whisky and water.

Mouse had not thrown herself on to his lap or into his arms. Oddly, she seated herself opposite him at the table, ridiculously prim and, after that first piercing cry, was almost as solemn as her sister. She stared at him round-eyed, uncertain whether he was really there or if he had come back to her from the grave like a ghost.

Matt said, "It's me, Mousie." He swallowed. "It's me, all right."

Elspeth and Sarah stared too. He was streaked with dirt. Big, muscular and weary, his cheeks bulged with the food. He gave them no particular greeting.

Mouse said, "Where's my brother?"

Matt swallowed. He picked mutton from his teeth with a fingernail. "He was too far down, Mousie. Davy an' Thomas Rance will no' be comin' out."

Sarah shed tears again quietly, a hand to her cheek. Only Mary Jean, who had wakened now, seemed truly elated to see the man. She squirmed in Elspeth's arms, shouting, "Matt, Matt. See Matt," until the man nodded and Elspeth put her down and let her run around the table and stand by him, a hand upon the blanket that covered his knee, smiling up at him in all innocence.

"Close the door, 'Pet," Matt said.

"Why did y' not find Davy?" said Mouse accusingly.

"Sit down all of you," said Matt.

He swilled a mouthful of whisky and put the glass to one side. He drew the blanket over his bare chest, glanced at Mary

Jean and managed a small tight smile for her before he spoke again.

He said, "They were in the seam behind the trap. I'd got down to base level, though only just. I could hear the hammer, for the workin's were quiet, so bloody quiet. Then there was this crackin' noise. Made the ears hurt wi' its sharpness."

"Where?" said Mouse; she still had not touched him.

"In the fissure," Matt said. "One big loud shatterin' crack. That's all I heard until the rush o' the sand o'erwhelmed me."

"Did you see it?" Elspeth asked.

"Aye," said Matt. "It came pourin' out o' the narrow tunnel. It looked like fur, like an animal in the lantern-light. I reached an' climbed the ladder which broke under me. I held on, though. I could hardly see, even though I still had the lantern. I climbed up to the level. I could hear the sand behind me clawin' an' pawin' up the walls. It was then the tremors started an' everythin' started t' fall."

Mouse nodded vigorously. It was as if she had him on trial, was a tiny fierce inquisitor paid to doubt his sincerity.

Matt said, "I didna dare stop. I plunged on along the second level wi' things fallin' all round about me. Another shake an' another. I thought the roof would come down."

"Did the sand reach the second level too?" said Elspeth.

"Aye, washed up like a tide. I was damned lucky, 'Pet. Without bein' aware o' it I'd overshot the ladder an' went on into a long ramp upwards, out of its range. What a fearful tangle o' gear was there. Slipped bogies an' smashed ladders, water swampin' out o' the drains."

"You managed out, though," said Mouse.

"Oh, aye, Mousie. How could I not?" said Matt. "I was near done in but I did not stop. I kept on till I discovered another ladder. Old, it was, all rotted. But it had been fixed wi' ropes an' was still in place. I climbed it, thirty or forty feet, an' came out into a high gallery. I'd lost all sense of direction. The tremors had stopped, thank God. I rested for a while, nursin' my candle in the lantern. Sense told me I was out of reach o' the sand, though I was thoroughly lost."

"The crew would've found you," said Mouse.

"No sayin' who would have found me," said Matt, with a glance at Elspeth. "Besides, I couldna say whether the main shaft had been brought down or not. I forged on. To make it short, eventually I found the bottom o' the Dead Man."

"There's no bucket, no rope in the Dead Man," said Mouse.

"Am I not the one t' tell you?" said Matt. "I climbed up the rotted staves an' shorin'. God, but it was bad. I lost the damned lantern when I was but half-roads up. I had t' climb in darkness, wi' only a faint wee glint o' night sky showin' through the boards t' guide me."

"I knew you'd come back, Matt. I knew you'd not desert me," said Mouse.

"I'd never desert you, Mouse," Matt said.

Elspeth said, "You didn't report, did you? You didn't tell anyone that you survived?"

Matt grinned. "Clever, 'Pet. You were always clever. Nah, I thought t' myself how the pit's done for. There will be no work in the Abbeyfield now, not for us, not for anyone."

"You want everybody t' believe you're dead?" said Elspeth.

"Why not?" said Matt. "I've been outlawed for months, livin' in fear I'd be recognised. If Matt Sinclair lies buried in the pit, Matt Shearer can step away wi' his head high."

"Outlaw?" said Mouse.

"Aye, my sweetheart. I killed a man once."

"What sort o' man?"

"A man like Georgie Haynes," said Elspeth.

Mouse smiled, nodding. She approved of that too. It did not daunt her that Matt, her Matt, had secrets that she could not share.

Elspeth said, "Where will you go, Matt?"

He shrugged. "North or south; it matters not. I'll turn my hand t' honest toil anywhere. I can find a ship, even, if I'm sore enough pressed—"

"Nah," said Mouse. "No ships, no sailin' off wi' the whales. You'll bide home wi' me, Matt."

"Oh, will I?" said Matt. "What makes you suppose I want t' burden myself wi' a lassie like you?"

"You love me!" said Mouse.

"Is that a fact?" said Matt.

"You do, you love me."

"Well . . ." said Matt.

It was Elspeth's turn for revelation now. She told Matt what news Keir Bolderon had given her and explained that she was free to return to Balnesmoor. The family, what was left of it, must part.

"Sarah?" Elspeth said. "You have a choice: will you take the road with Mouse an' Matt or will you come with me? I'll care for you, Sarah, I promise."

They sat about the table watching as the solemn, brown-skinned little girl made up her mind. She put no questions, sought no assurances. She contemplated her fists in her lap for a minute or two and then leaned across and put her arms about Elspeth's neck, clinging at last.

It was still dark when they left the cottage for the last time and crossed the plank bridge over the Rutherford burn. Occupied again, the cottages were quiet and no dogs barked. The halo had faded from above the workings but you could still hear the creak of winding-gear and the high singing sound of taut ropes in the cold dawn air. Was Keir Bolderon there? Elspeth wondered. Did he intend to come to her again, not to let her go? She kept the shawl tight about her, hiding her face, held tight to Mary Jean as they slipped across the corner of the field to the tree line and the back road. She would not have to walk all the way to Stirling. She had money for a coach, for food and lodging for herself and the girls on the journey back to Balnesmoor. It was more, much more than she had had when she came here. Matt had the lion's share of the cash, however. Mouse, true to the end, had argued heatedly that Davy's share should go to her, to her and Matt. Elspeth had given in without argument.

They gathered not far from the wall of the kirkyard. The river had trapped the first of the daylight and stretched out like a long metallic seam below the cloud. There was light enough for farewells, for kissing and tears.

Matt took Elspeth in his arms.

"Tell Anna," he whispered, "I'm a dead man."

"Matt?"

"It's for the best, 'Pet."

"Aye, I suppose it is."

He kissed her on the brow and on the cheek. Mouse watched, frowning and possessive.

"My father too," said Matt.

"It'll hurt him, Matt."

"Only for a little while."

He released her, turned, looked at the sky.

"Aye, Mousie," he said. "It's a far piece we'll have to travel before night. Come." He lowered his hands to his thighs. "Jump up. I'll carry you for the first mile. How's that?"

That was the last Elspeth ever saw of Matt Sinclair, the last glimpse Sarah had of her sister. Mouse rode away on the man's broad back, clinging to his neck, giggling again, shapes against the dawn light that tinted the sky to the east. Elspeth watched them go. She felt odd, different, changed now. She did not need Keir Bolderon's protection or his charity. The fact that she thought of him at all was mark enough of her independence. She adjusted the bundle about her shoulders and fastened the knots of the shawl to hold it secure.

She would avoid Placket, cross the back of the hill to the crossroads at Rutherford and rouse the old carrier who had quarters in the farm, pay him to take them to Alloa or even on to Stirling if his horses were strong enough.

She looked at the girls.

"Mary Jean, take my hand."

"Aye, Mammy."

"You too, Sarah."

Sarah Bennet hesitated. She wiped her nose with her wrist and then twined her fingers into Elspeth's and set off trustingly in step along the road to the new place, where she had never been before.

Tom Tolland would not talk, more's the pity. What truths that old devil might have revealed. He could have solved the mystery of what was happening at Moss House now that Gaddy Patterson's eldest had seen fit to return. He might even have been able to answer the most teasing question of all – where she had been and who she had been with. But the steward had always known where his loyalty lay and was, besides, more unsure of his position in the household than ever he had been with Jamie.

Tolland had been startled, not to say astonished, when Elspeth had trailed in very late one night with a child on each hand and a bundle slung across her shoulder to announce that she had returned to claim what was rightfully hers. She had started giving orders as if she had inherited not only Moodie's money but his authority too. Tom Tolland responded as any downy old steward would do – he obeyed to the letter her every command, answered truthfully and directly every question she asked him, and kept his mouth shut between whiles. He gave nothing away even to his friend Hunter who drove to Moss House to offer Sir Randall Bontine's greetings and condolences and to enquire if there was any service that the laird might bestow for the comfort of Mrs Moodie. "Nothing, thank you, Mr Hunter," was the curt reply; and the solemn, brown-skinned child was sent to the kitchen to make sure that Messrs Tolland and Hunter did not settle down to gossip.

Who did she think she was? Some queen or empress? Damned if she did not behave like one, never leaving the house to make herself seen about the village, not even turning up in the private pew at the kirk and it lying empty Sunday after Sunday though the tithes were paid without fail through the offices of the Dumbarton lawyer. The Dumbarton lawyer: oh, aye, he had his privileges, all right. He was permitted entry at any time, day or night. He even stayed once when the November fog was so thick you could have ravelled it into a muffler. But she, Elspeth Patterson Moodie, did not deign to show her face and anyone who went there expecting a welcome was shown the door from the doorstep and turned away, even her dear sister and her man. It seemed that the wife had inherited some of old Jamie's thrawn quality, perhaps a wee touch of his reclusive madness too. Nothing happened in those first three weeks to change the opinion of the good folk of Balnesmoor no matter how they discussed it and dug for scraps of gossip.

The return of Elspeth Patterson Moodie was not the only scandal in the Lennox that autumn. But the other was more remote from the main street of Balnesmoor and came into the village as no more than a whisper on the wind. It seemed that the laird's brother, Mr Gilbert, had gotten himself into a tangle with his finances and was in danger of being declared insolvent. No connection was made, of course, between the Bontines' problems and Elspeth Patterson Moodie's reappearance, for only a handful of people knew where she had been in the missing years and those people were discreet in the extreme.

It was three weeks to the day after Elspeth wandered in from wherever she had been, with her own bairn and some other brat in tow, before her intentions began to emerge.

Anna, of course, had been furious at being rejected; at not being welcomed with wide open arms, wept upon and fussed over on the instant of Elspeth's return. She would lie in bed of a night, propped on an elbow, frowning into Robert's face, now and again rather painfully pounding him on the chest with her fist to demand answers that the chap could not possibly give.

"What's she up to? Why was I turned away? Has she heard about us? Has she found out, from yon lawyer perhaps, what you've done wi' the account books?"

"Anna—"

"Him, Tolland, turnin' up his nose at me, never mind at you. Showin' us the door. God, but I've never been so humiliated. Why did you not *insist* on seein' her, Robert?"

"I'm in no position to insist. She's your sister, Anna, but she is also, alas, my employer."

"Are you just goin' t' bow meekly t' this insult?"

"Anna –"

"My own flesh an' blood. My own sister. She'll not even come out of her damned parlour t' give me a greetin'. After three long years o' separation too. It's an ill an' evil nature that's in her."

"She's takin' stock, Anna."

"Aye, scourin' up all the lies she can from folk that have a down upon us. Lord knows what stories she'll have heard about me."

"Anna, Anna—"

"She does not even know I've a child or whether it's boy, girl or cabbage-stalk. What's more she disna care."

Robert Rudge would sigh, though he rather enjoyed the vigour of Anna's temper and would smother it in due course by taking her in hand and rolling her on to her back, giving her cause to forget, for a while, that his position, apropos Elspeth, was infinitely more precarious than her own. In his heart Robert Rudge respected the Widow Moodie for her refusal to be distracted by folk clamouring for favours. She would be finding out in detail where she stood before she made a move in any direction.

Anna would say, "What's this I hear about Mr Gibbie?"

Robert Rudge would say, "His finances have gone askew."

Anna would nod, as if she knew all about insolvency and the law relating to bankruptcy, and would immediately return to complaining about her sister while Robert Rudge lay recovering from his exertions, hands above his head, thinking that she was beautiful in anger and wondering if it would spoil her shape to bear him children.

There was no such patience in evidence in Strachan Castle. Alicia and Gilbert had not lain down side by side for weeks and neither was in a position to offer the other any sort of comfort. Recriminations were hurled between wife and husband, husband and wife as each day brought fresh travail and a further complication to the situation that they had created for themselves.

It had come to light very quickly that Gilbert had 'loaned out' the Moodie trust fund. The conjunction of events – Elspeth Moodie's return to Balnesmoor and the swamping of the coal pit at Placket – had been as catastrophic as the collision of two planets. Within a week of the event it became clear to Gibbie that he had been a complete and utter fool who had not understood one word of the law of contract and agreement and could not recover a penny of the ten thousand pounds he had given to Hector Fotheringham in exchange for the promise of stock in the mining company. How this palpable crime could be condoned by the law of Scotland was more than poor Gibbie could fathom. But it was – absolutely – and he had no claim or redress against the owner of the company.

What was more, a letter had been received from Hildebrand requesting the transfer of the trust fund to a drawing account in the Bank of Scotland, and Gibbie had been forced to put himself on the carpet before the Brothers Pryde and confess that he had extracted the fund, or most of it, for personal and private use.

The Brothers Pryde had smiled consolingly, patted him on the shoulder, assured him that the Falkirk Farmers' Bank would not go under because of his indiscretion – and, within a day, had had a writ of prosecution drafted, sealed and delivered, arresting all Gibbie's credit, thus absolving themselves from knowledge of or involvement in his acts of embezzlement.

Gibbie had wrung his hands in despair, had wept, had appealed to Alicia for comfort and advice. But now that it came down to it Alicia joined forces with her husband's detractors and called down coals of fire upon his head. It would be only a matter of time, Alicia informed him, before the bailiffs arrived to strip the very clothes from her back and the shoes from her feet and send her out on to the roads in rags to beg bread from strangers to keep her children from starving.

Gulping down his pride Gibbie went at last to call upon Mrs Moodie – and was turned away. He was shocked to the core by this rejection; to be snubbed by the sister of a servant of the Bontines as if he was a thief and an outlaw, not brother to the laird of Ottershaw and Balnesmoor. Quite furious – for Gibbie – he had ridden straight to Ottershaw and thrown the whole sorry story before Randall, had prostrated himself, grovelled, anticipating that Randall would pull him out of the fire, scorched but unconsumed.

Randall had led him upstairs to the library. It was the only corner of Ottershaw that had remained unchanged since Old Sir Gilbert's day, for all the rest showed tasteful touches of the lady of the house.

Once within the library, door closed, Randall had rounded on Gibbie. "If, Gilbert, you expect me to shell out ten thousand pounds to cover your errors then you are even more of a fool than I take you for. I do not *have* ten thousand. I do not have *one* thousand. I will be able – just – to clear my own debt with the Farmers' Bank and absolve Ottershaw from connection with the mess that you've created. But I cannot help you, Gilbert. What in God's name possessed you to dabble in mineral investment?"

"Alicia thought—"

"Alicia! Of course! Damn her vaultin' ambition."

Gilbert bit back a heated retort at this slur on his wife's character. He could not, even now, believe that Randall would not save him.

"How much *can* you raise, Gilbert?"

"I – I have no idea. Not much, not much at all."

"It was a mad, an insane dealin'. You handed your head on a plate to this Fotheringham."

"I know it."

"Now you must suffer the consequences."

"Alicia says it will mean imprisonment."

"Probably."

"Would you see me in prison, Randall; a Bontine in jail?"

"Fotheringham cannot have spent such a monstrous sum on the Abbeyfield."

"I'm sure he has not. Indeed, exploration of the field was not due to begin—"

"Ask *him* for a loan."

"Randall! Fotheringham has already refused me. What's more, I'm told that my bond with him cannot be dissolved, that it's binding to the letter, to the penny. He's not the sort of gentleman to aid me out of charity."

"Gilbert, I would give you alms if I could, man, but it would be no more than alms. You are not the only person in these hard times to feel the pinch of penury. Prices are up and down, down and up, and the cattle—"

"Randall, I will be prosecuted, ruined, shamed."

"I can, perhaps, raise eight or ten hundred pounds."

"Not enough, not nearly enough."

"Mother, if you care to approach her, and Uncle Alexander may be able to find a few hundred more. Then it's up to you to buy off Elspeth Moodie, to plead with her for defrayment."

"She will not see me."

"I expect," said Randall, "that she is otherwise occupied at this particular period. Mrs Moodie will make an approach to you when it suits her."

"Do you suppose that Mr Hildebrand might be able to help me?"

"Oh, dear God in Heaven!" Randall shouted in exasperation. "Do you understand nothing, Gibbie? Hildebrand is *her* agent, her adviser. He wove the damned web. It's Hildebrand that you are up against."

"What shall I do, Randall? What *can* I do?"

"Prepare, I fear, for the worst."

* * *

Tom Tolland was not the only person in Elspeth Patterson Moodie's intimate circle who seemed to recognise in her certain attributes acquired during the years of her marriage to the weaver. Angus Hildebrand was quite astonished, though he showed it not, of course, by her astuteness and her grasp of just what her inheritance entailed not only in terms of hard cash but in power and responsibility.

She asked about Kennart, inspected the accounts.

She asked about Robert Rudge, digested Mr Hildebrand's opinions of the manager of the mill.

She asked about Anna, heard the sorry story of her banishment from Ottershaw and her motherhood and her flight into the arms of Robert Rudge, the reprobate, and how she resided with him now in Drymen and professed that she would become his legal wife as soon as divorcement was possible.

She asked dozens of other questions, even about her husband and his state of mind and his welfare in his declining months. Mr Hildebrand answered as truthfully and as tactfully as he could, blending fact and compassion in a manner unusual for a member of his profession.

Mr Hildebrand had questions of his own. He put these to his client – for Elspeth Patterson Moodie was his client whether he wished it or not – with great discretion for he sensed that she was reluctant to talk of her months in exile from Balnesmoor and was touchy on the subject of her motives for quitting Moodie and Moss House. He discovered, however, that she had been employed in the Abbeyfield pit and felt an odd imbalance in the circumstances at this information, as if he had lost control to something fateful and supernatural.

"The Abbeyfield, in Fifeshire?"

"Yes, Mr Hildebrand. I was employed there. I dwelled on the field with a collier's family."

"In what capacity, if I may ask, Mrs Moodie, were you employed?"

"In the counting-house."

"Indeed!"

"Do I detect a certain asperity in your tone, Mr Hildebrand?"

"Asperity? Oh, indeed no; not asperity, I assure you, Mrs Moodie. What you detect in my tone is rather wonderment at the mysterious ways in which Divine Providence moves."

"I would not have taken you for a religious man."

"The large sum of capital – twelve thousand pounds to be exact – which your late husband realised by the sale of stocks and assets was placed in trust with a partner in the Falkirk Farmers' Bank."

"For what purpose?"

"To prevent that sum being easily accessible to claimants against the will, in effect Mr Moodie's sisters. It is separate and distinct from that sum which Mr Moodie prudently laid aside to finance the operation of his estates; that is, the mill at Kennart and your domestic offices."

"And from which you are paid too?"

"Indeed."

"And the reason for your 'wonderment', Mr Hildebrand?"

The lawyer explained. He saw Elspeth Moodie's eyes grow round with surprise at the connections that had occurred, linking her to Gilbert Bontine, and Gilbert Bontine to the fate of the pit far off across the Forth.

A vision of Keir Bolderon darted fleetingly across her mind's eye but she could not calculate how the pit manager and the laird's brother had come together in disaster. She did not raise Keir Bolderon's name with the lawyer, however. There was in her a certain slender guilt in respect of the man she had deceived and who had deceived her, and a certain wistful regret that they could not have met under other and better circumstances. She missed Keir Bolderon as she missed James. She was firm with herself, would not yield to silly sorrow. Even so, she could not help but experience James's presence here in Moss House. If it had been her father's intention to bring her round, then he had already partly succeeded. She had no defence against selective memory or the growing realisation that he had, in his way, loved her.

In those first weeks back at Balnesmoor she behaved exactly as her father would have done, with patience and just a hint of autocracy, testing herself in authority to see not only if she enjoyed it but if she could cope with it.

She instructed Tolland to find additional servants, a nurse and a tutor, nobody too grand. She stepped out to inspect the carriages in the coach-house by the stables and to look at the horses that had not been sold. She ordered the old cabriolet to be refurbished and a pair of young carriage horses to be purchased from a reputable dealer and not from the block at Balfron horse fair, thank you, Tolland.

When the time came she held her audiences in the big bright drawing-room and made sure that Tom Tolland's girl earned her keep by dusting and polishing that room until every item within it gleamed like new. She consulted Mr Hildebrand on the state of her immediate funds, had him explain to her in precise detail how she might seek legal redress against Gilbert Bontine for his ridiculous appropriation of her trust fund capital.

In the times when she was not Mrs James Moodie she was still Elspeth Patterson and took delight in being home again, close to the long run of the moor, within sight of the hills above the loch, with the smoke from the village chimneys purling up soft in the soft late-autumn days. She had Mary Jean and Sarah for company, and fine company the girls gave her. Sarah was salved against the pain of losing her brother and of separation from Mouse by all the novelties that money could buy, those things that Elspeth had learned to take for granted during her marriage and might have better appreciated if she had come to them without the burdens of doubt and passion that were the lot of the hill-bred lass.

She would never forget how Sarah snuggled down in clean linen sheets. How Sarah smiled when her head sank into a great feather pillow so deep that she could not even see Mary Jean lying by her side, and how the pair of them giggled and wriggled until softness and warmth overcame them and they fell fast asleep in each other's arms. Nor would Elspeth forget the sight of Sarah and Mary Jean together in the long copper bath before the bedroom fire; how Sarah kept smelling the stopper of the bottle of floral oil that scented the bath water until her seriousness melted into a splashing spree with Mary Jean, though Tom Tolland was none too pleased when he had to roll up the Chinese rug and take it out to the lawn to dry.

Sarah took to soup plates and teapots with curved spouts and the heavy silver knives and forks with which Elspeth adorned the table for her own sensual pleasure as much as the show of it and to teach the girls by example the techniques of gentility.

On the first real day of winter, after a sharp crackling frost which turned the last of the oak leaves yellow on the track and stiffened the crust of the moor under a brilliant blue sky, Elspeth took the children for a walk. They were wrapped up in plaids and tartans, all brand new and perfectly fitted and with new little boots upon their feet. She took them along the familiar path towards the Orrals, that piece of wild country that lay behind Moss House.

Sarah seemed calm and contented and her brown eyes were watchful at the skim of birds across the rough coverts and the high-hung hawks above the rim of the hills.

Elspeth did not venture far that first day. She did not go near the glen where she had met Michael those years ago. Michael was a memory and, no matter how she yearned for it, did not seem real and part of her, not even when she studied Mary Jean and sought the man in her.

The girls were excited to be out, so smart and fashionable in their new clothes. They chatted away as they walked. It startled them, however, when they caught sight of a young man on pony-back and they ran back to Elspeth and gripped her hands very tightly indeed.

Elspeth too was taken aback. It was as if she had slipped through a tear in the veil of time for it was Matt, she thought, who came looming out of the moor-fold not more than fifty yards away, not Matt as she had last seen him, though, but Matt as he had been ten years ago when they were all young and innocent.

Mary Jean too was deceived by the resemblance. She cried out, *"Matt. Me, Matt. See, it's me."*

Sandy Sinclair reined up the pony. He rode it bareback and with only an old rope bridle but he rode confidently and well. He wore only a wool shirt, the sleeves pushed back and the collar open to show his chest. The cold did not seem to bother him in the slightest. He had no hat upon his head and his hair, as fair and fine as Mary Jean's, stuck up like a corona.

"Why, is it yourself, Elspeth? I mean, Mrs Moodie."

"Sandy?"

"Aye, it's me. I'll have grown a bit since you – I mean, I mean, since we last met."

He dismounted, held the pony by the rope. Behind him now appeared a small swarthy urchin, bare-legged and suspicious.

Sandy said, "Awa' on home, Macfarlane. I'll come by the farm in a while. We'll no' find strays this far east."

The urchin was gone instantly, vanishing into the fold. He did not reappear upon the breast of the moor, though Elspeth looked for him. He would find his own tracks, secret as a fox's, to the farm that her step-father and Gaddy had once owned and which now belonged to Randall Bontine's shepherds.

Awkwardly Sandy Sinclair stepped forward and tendered his hand. It was a gesture of politeness that Elspeth had not expected. She thought of Sandy still as a daft boy, not as a depute grieve, not as his father's son.

She shook his hand, feeling the strength of it, and then introduced her daughter and Sarah, behaving as if they were already grown into ladies.

Mary Jean said, "You're no' Matt."

"I'm his brother. You can call me Sandy, if ye like."

"Sandy," said Mary Jean, nodding.

If Mary Jean was puzzled by Sandy's likeness to Matt, and by the conjunction of the new life with the old, Sarah seemed to be momentarily stunned by it.

A soft flush rose to her cheeks as Sandy Sinclair bent and took her hand and gave it a shake. She stared straight up at him and let out her breath swiftly.

Sandy laughed. "I'm surprised the wee one remembers Matt."

He would have given all his attention now to Elspeth but Sarah's gaze was disconcerting and he glanced away and then back at her. "My, but that's a fine dress, fine an' warm," he said. "Bonnie, too."

Sarah blushed a deeper hue but did not retreat like a child behind Elspeth.

"I'm employed at Ottershaw again," said Sandy. "We're chasin' out strays before the weather turns bad. Aye, it's done careful now, every beast, every ewe countit an' cared for."

Mary Jean said, "Matt catched whales."

"Matt what?"

It was Sarah who rescued the situation.

To Elspeth's relief she said, "It's not Matt, Mary Jean. Not our Matt. Somebody else."

Mary Jean looked glum, then went forward to pat the pony, a tall strong-looking garron that was too skittish to be a toy for a small child and stamped and whisked his head against the rope. Mary Jean returned to her mother and took her hand.

Sandy said, "I heard you'd come home, Mrs Moodie. Have ye – have ye seen Anna yet?"

"No, not yet. How is she, Sandy? Do you know?"

"How would I know? I'm on Ottershaw now."

"Of course," said Elspeth; the conversation had taken two awkward turns and she was tense, somehow, in the presence of the younger Sinclair.

The chance meeting indicated that she would soon have to concoct a plausible tale and tell Anna that Matt was dead, break the news to Lachlan Sinclair and his wife. She thought of Matt with Mouse clinging to his shoulders, and wondered if Lachlan would have reason to be proud, in time, of both his sons.

"You'll have heard how the laird marrit a woman from the north?" Sandy said.

"Tolland has given me all the news. Is your father well?"

"I see little of him. He has grave concerns at Strachan, so I hear."

Elspeth paused, awkwardness increasing. Sandy Sinclair was too bluff and honest a person to deceive to his face. He was physically so like Matt but in character, she saw, he was Lachlan Sinclair to the core.

She said, "Well, I must get the bairns home, Sandy, before it grows too cold."

"Aye," he agreed. "I'll be needit back at Ottershaw."

"Good day, then, Sandy."

"Good day, Mrs Moodie."

He mounted the pony with a lithe strong motion, and turned it about on its small hoofs as if it was a thoroughbred horse and not just a pack animal.

Sarah's eyes had not left him from the moment that he had touched her hand.

He turned the pony and gave the girl a special little salute. "I trust you'll be happy in Balnesmoor, lass," he said with a certain formality that only his wide, boyish grin saved from being pompous.

"I – I will, thank ye," Sarah murmured.

Sandy was gone, riding the garron hard down the ramp of the moor-fold and out of sight.

Elspeth said, "Come on, then. I'm starved for my tea."

"Cake?" said Mary Jean. "Cake for me, Mam?"

"For all of us," said Elspeth, and led the girls by the hand away from the edge of the rough country, while Sarah, looking back over her shoulder, scanned the sleeve of the Orrals for one last glimpse of handsome Sandy Sinclair.

It was brought home to her, in part by the meeting with Matt's brother, that she could delay no longer. She must meet with Anna, with Robert Rudge, with Lachlan Sinclair, must decide what she should do about Gilbert Bontine and the massive amount of money that her father had salted away for her that had been 'lost' in the Abbeyfield. She did not consider it a dreadful irony or a wild coincidence that Balnesmoor and the lands of Placket should be linked in her. She collected into herself all the vagaries of her own strange life and set them alongside its benefits. That she had been found at all in the sheep hut on Drumglass was in itself something wild and miraculous. All that had followed from it, through Gaddy and through James, seemed destined and inevitable – up to this point. She was grown now, alone now, mistress of Moss House, owner of Kennart, employer of weavers and spinners, mother and father to Mary Jean, Sarah Bennet's adoptive guardian. Whatever became of them would depend upon her determination and common sense.

Late that night, after Tom Tolland had slipped away to bed with his girl to keep him warm, Elspeth lit a lamp and put on her heavy robe and slippers and went downstairs.

There was moonlight in the casement on the landing, a great silver swathe of it falling into the hall below, but it did not reach the corridor that branched to the kitchens or to the back room that had served her father as a retreat for so many years. It was here that he had stored his gloomy secrets, brooded upon them, nursed his plots and schemes. It was here that she had first felt pity – and hatred – for him.

The room was locked. She went into the kitchen, silent in her slippers, found the domestic key-ring and took from it the long, bony key. She crossed the corridor, opened the door and, with the lantern held out before her, went in.

Shadows shrank before the light then gathered in the narrow corner behind the ladderback chair that had once been Mother Moodie's throne. It was all exactly as she remembered it, nothing changed: desk, chair, decanters, a bare mantelshelf over an empty hearth. Even the stout wooden chest, iron-bound, still stood below the window, its heart-shaped lock unrepaired.

Elspeth took a deep breath. She got down on her knees, paused, then lifted the lid of the chest. It contained nothing but a shrivelled little bag of lavender. No letters, ledgers or documents of any kind; James had burned them all. She felt no sadness at this loss of the evidence of her birth and her false marriage, only relief.

She gave a harsh sigh, got to her feet again, tipped down the lid of the chest with the toe of her slipper and put the lamp upon the desk. She opened a drawer and found a block of watermarked writing-paper, pens, a knife and a corked bottle of ink that had not dried up. She pulled out the chair, adjusted the lamp, and seated herself.

It was chilly in the room, almost dank. Tomorrow she would have Tolland light a fire. She would have fresh drapes made for the window, the empty chest and the ladderback chair removed. She would bring down the tub chair from the drawing-room, make the room her own.

In the meantime she had letters to write; two letters at least, letters which would signify that she had forsaken the legacy of her childhood, had put the past away and would accept the future that her father had built for her here in Moss House, in Balnesmoor.

He had changed so much that Elspeth could hardly believe that it was only four years since last she had seen him. It was not just that he had grown grey and stooped and lined, he had lost, she felt, his dignity. Stripped of it she saw in him not yeoman but peasant. Even his clothes were lumpy and threadbare and the horse he had ridden from Strachan, which she had glimpsed from the window, was a limping old mare and nothing like the steeds that had once borne him about the parks of Ottershaw.

She had chosen one of her favourite frocks, a morning dress of beige French lawn with a buckled sash, not too ornamental, and had put up her hair under a plain cap. She knew only too well that her appearance disconcerted him and he did not show her his face, chin up and eyes square, but curled his hat in his fingers and stared at his knobbly shoes with their tarnished buckles.

Elspeth said, "I am not going to tell you a lie, Mr Sinclair. It would be the easy thing for me to do but I have decided against it. What you reveal to your wife an' to your family is a matter for you to ponder. I suggest, though, that you abide by Matt's wishes—"

"Matt?" Lachlan Sinclair lifted his head, the furrow of concern deep as a gash between his brows.

"Aye, it's concernin' Matt that I've asked you here today."

"Have you heard from him? Is he—"

Elspeth held up her hand. "Matt's well. He's thrivin'."

Agitatedly Lachlan said, "Where, where's the lad now? Is he here?" He looked about, turned to the tall window as if he half-expected to see his son upon the lawn. "Have ye brought him back?"

Firmly Elspeth said, "Contain yourself, please, Mr Sinclair. No, Matt's not here. Indeed, he'll not show his face in Balnesmoor again. To all intents and purposes, Matt is dead." When he rose in his chair she snapped at him. "Sit yourself down, I beg you. Hear me out."

She told the grieve part of the story, excising certain episodes, refreshing others. She told him of the Abbeyfield and of Mouse, of the in-break of sand and the disaster that had cost two lives and had ruined the pit for ever. Sinclair was too astonished to interrupt. He was well aware that the Abbeyfield was the self-same pit that had sucked in Mr Gibbie's money and changed all their lives. He could not grasp how Elspeth Patterson, let alone his renegade son, had become part of it.

Elspeth said, "So, do you see, Mr Sinclair, what a boon it is for Matt if he is thought to be dead?"

"Not him, but this other name," said Lachlan.

"Shearer; yes," Elspeth agreed. "But his identity, by whatever name, is buried in the sand under the Abbeyfield."

"What shall I do about it?"

"Tell your wife."

"That he's dead? I canna be so cruel."

"Put about the rumour, in that case," said Elspeth. "I shall inform my sister that he's deceased. I'll tell her something of what I've told you."

"I canna kill him, even in my mind."

"I understand," said Elspeth.

"Where is he now?"

Elspeth said, "I don't know. I doubt if we – any of us – will hear of him again, though it's odd how things come round sometimes."

Lachlan Sinclair gave a grunt. "Call it odd, Mrs Moodie, that it's you who'll bring down my master."

"What do you know of that?"

"What I've heard," said Lachlan Sinclair with uncharacteristic slyness. "It's talk that you'll have him imprisoned."

"I did not ask you here to discuss matters of business. Strachan and Mr Gilbert are associated with me on quite another plane, Mr Sinclair. I felt compelled to tell you of Matt, though, because you've been kind in the past, to me and to my mother."

Lachlan Sinclair pressed his gnarled hands on to his thighs and pushed himself upright. "Will that be all?"

"Will you tell?"

"She'll want t' marry again. Marry Rudge."

"So I believe."

"Is that why you'd have the world think Matt's dead, to suit Anna?"

"The officers of the law will not be on the lookout for a man who's rumoured to be dead. They will not remember his name for very long."

"Is he safe, do y' think?"

"He's safe."

"Happy?"

"She's a fine girl, sharp enough to keep him straight. Aye, Matt will be happy wi' her, with Allison."

"Is this all for Anna, your sister?"

"It's because I do not know what else to do, Lachlan."

He worried the hat with thick fingers, shoulders bowed like an elder at prayer. He had lost all respect in the community and had not the energy to regain it. He was a man at the mercy of his masters, a victim of the changing fortunes of the times. She felt a pang of sorrow in her heart for Lachlan, remembering what he had once been, strict and fair in the service of the lairds, dedicated to unswerving principles. Without them Lachlan was just like Matt, a man nameless and wandering.

"Aye, I understand," he muttered. "It's better if he's thought t' be dead. Better for all of us. Aileen too. I'll not tell her the whole truth, though."

Elspeth said, "I'm sorry."

"What call have you to be sorry for us?"

"None," she said. "But I am, nonetheless."

"Tell your sister, tell Anna she's free. I'll not queer the new marriage for her," said Lachlan Sinclair.

"Very well."

Elspeth put out her hand to ring the bell to summon Tolland to show her guest out. But Lachlan barked, "No, do not do that, Mrs Patt – Mrs Moodie. I can find my own way, thank you."

A quarter of an hour later she had Anna before her; Anna summoned too by letter at an appointed hour. But Anna did not come alone. She would not be separated from Robert now, nor from Robbie. She arrived in the Kennart bob-cart in conglomerated finery with her son struggling in her arms.

Tolland opened the door and Anna marched past him.

"Where is she?" Anna demanded. "Where's my sister?"

"This way, Madam," said Tolland.

There was the whisper of a smile, rueful and amused, on Robert Rudge's face as he trailed Anna into the elegant room and greeted Gaddy Patterson's other daughter.

"Is it not about time?" were Anna's first words. "Where, in God's Good Name, have you been?"

Whatever air of detachment Elspeth had intended to adopt was instantly gone. "I'm here now, Anna," she snapped back, "an' that's all that matters. Is that your son?"

"Aye." Anna thrust Robbie, struggling, out in her arms as if he was a piglet at a show. "Is he not bonnie?"

"He'll be bonnier still an' a great deal quieter if you set him down," said Elspeth.

This Anna did. She watched her son trot immediately to seek consolation from Robert who took the boy between his long knees and let him turn his face into the vee of his vest from which position, in two or three minutes, he peeped out coyly at his mother and his aunt.

Anna plumped herself down on the couch. She gave her lace-frilled hat a shake and demanded, "Well, what have you t'say for yourself now you've finally condescended t'see us?"

Robert Rudge gave a little casual cough. "Anna and I intend to be married, in case that fact had escaped you, Elspeth."

"I'm Robert's housekeeper presently," Anna added.

"When do you intend to marry?"

"As soon as I can obtain a divorcement," Anna replied.

Elspeth had forgotten how garrulous Anna could be, and how wearisome. It galled her, slightly, that her sister had uttered not one word of welcome or enquired after her welfare.

Elspeth said, "Matt's dead."

For once Anna was struck dumb. She jolted herself back on the couch, hand to her bosom, lips parted. She glanced at Robert Rudge who, stroking Robbie's hair, shrugged his shoulders and, finding voice before Anna, asked the obvious question, "How do you know this, Elspeth?"

Anna had the decency to listen in silence while her sister answered the question with a full explanation of the circumstances. She might hold her tongue but she could not contain her annoyance at the unfolding of the story. She fiddled with her hat, her skirt and finally with the tassle of the couch itself, her restless fingers betraying her agitation.

"You stayed wi' Matt, lived wi' him?" Anna demanded, when Elspeth had concluded.

"Not as you suppose, Anna. I wish to make that very clear."

Robert Rudge said, "Who'll make a record of the toll in the Abbeyfield pit?"

Elspeth shook her head. "I know not."

"No body," said Robert Rudge. "No name upon a stone. Indeed, if there was a name it would be the wrong name."

"All those months an' you never thought t' let me into the secret," said Anna, finding her voice.

"How could I? How could I be sure that James would not find out?"

"Jamie Moodie's been dead for an age."

"I did not know it."

"Aye, but you never tried t' find out."

"A moment, if you please, my dear," Robert Rudge said. "If we might return to the matter of Matt Sinclair's tragic demise; do you suggest, Elspeth, that Anna and I declare knowledge of the death and seek for Anna the immediate status of widowhood?"

Elspeth was grateful to the agent for bringing her back to level ground. She had never much cared for the wolfish Mr Rudge but he too seemed to have changed. It occurred to her that perhaps the changes were not in the men at all but in her, that she was not the same person who had fled from Balnesmoor, that she had become so much more assured that her values had altered accordingly.

She answered, "I would say it would not be wise."

"No body," Robert Rudge repeated. "No proof."

"An' it would get you into hot water, would it not?" said Anna to her sister. "Since you might be accused o' harbourin' a fugitive from justice if it came out you'd been sharin' a cottage wi' my husband."

"Emphatically not wise," said Robert Rudge. "I think, my dearest, that we would do well to leave things as they are, not to sue for divorcement until the appropriate time."

Robbie burrowed his head against the man's stomach and Robert caught the child gently by the arms and swung him up and around and perched him on his knee.

"I'm prepared t' leave it t'your judgement, Robert," said Anna. "But I still think you were selfish not t' send me word, 'Pet."

"I was strugglin' with other things, Anna. I'd reached the end of my tether," said Elspeth. "Besides, I didn't ask you here to quarrel."

Robert fished in the pocket of his coat and brought out a piece of ginger candy which he unwrapped from a paper and held out before him. Robbie plucked it away with his lips like a trout will a fly and hummed tunelessly to himself as he sucked the strong-flavoured sweetmeat in his cheek.

Anna said, "I suppose you'll be wantin' somethin' from us."

To Anna's surprise, and dismay, Elspeth got to her feet and rang the silver bell upon the table.

"No, Anna, I require nothin' at all from you. Since you saw fit to bring Mr Rudge with you this morning, however, I will avail myself of the opportunity to have a brief word with him about Kennart's future."

Anna was silenced by the gravity of the statement. It had not seemed right for her to raise the issue and she was apprehensive now that Elspeth had come straight to it.

The drawing-room door opened. Tolland stood there, dressed in his best and neatly groomed, smarter than he had ever been in the reign of James Simpson Moodie.

Elspeth said, "Perhaps you would care to take Robbie to the kitchen—"

"Kitchen?" said Anna.

"—to partake of some refreshment. You will also have an opportunity to meet the girls: my daughter, and Miss Sarah Bennet."

Before Anna could protest Tom Tolland boomed, "This way, Mrs Sinclair, if you please."

Nonplussed, Anna glanced at Robert who gave her a short but positive nod and nudged Robbie towards his mother. Anna obeyed. She took Robbie by the hand and preceded Tolland from the drawing-room.

The door closed.

Robert Rudge relaxed a little, crossing one knee over the other.

Elspeth said, "Do you really intend to marry my sister?"

Robert answered, "Yes, of course I do."

"Does she love you?"

"Who knows?"

"Do you love her?"

"Are you givin' her away, Mrs Moodie?"

"Would that I could," said Elspeth. "Tell me, who is the father of the little boy?"

"Anna claims it's the laird, Randall."

"Do you believe her?"

"I think Robbie's a Sinclair through an' through."

"But you haven't expressed that opinion to Anna?"

Robert Rudge grinned. "Housekeeper or wife, she's entitled to her illusions."

"You have no illusions, Mr Rudge?"

"Nary a one."

"What if I tell you that I might sell off Kennart?"

"It is your prerogative to do so."

"What would you do then?"

"If you mean, Elspeth, would I still be willin' to marry Anna, the answer is in the affirmative."

"How would you keep her, and Robbie?"

"I do not think you intend to sell Kennart at all," said Robert Rudge. "It's my belief that you want to be sure I'll make an honest woman out of Anna."

"You have an ill reputation, Mr Rudge."

"No, I have a lurid past; quite a different thing."

"Will Kennart make me money?"

"Yes."

"Will you continue to manage it?"

"Along with Mr Scarf, yes, if you wish."

"How much do the mice nibble from the harvest?" said Elspeth.

"Your friend and adviser Angus Hildebrand can, I expect, tell you to the penny," said Robert Rudge. "It's not enough to concern you. Besides, if I have family interests at heart I'll be a mouse no more, will I?"

"Are we forgin' a contract, Robert?"

"So it would seem, Elspeth."

"I'll ask you not to forget that it is my mill, my concern and that you will always remain my servant."

"Oh!" said Robert Rudge, with a little whistle. "You're very direct, Mrs Moodie."

"Not so direct as all that. However, you need not concern yourself that I will discharge you from your present post unless you give me reason."

"No skinnin', no flighty behaviour. Honest an' upright?"

"And efficient."

"I'm always that," said Robert Rudge.

"Very well, Robert," said Elspeth. "Now, let me ask you one more question: does the laird of Ottershaw know that he's not Robbie's father?"

Even the wily Robert Rudge was caught by the enquiry. He opened his mouth, spread his hands, pursed his lips.

"I – I—"

"Give me your opinion, please."

"He thinks that Robbie's his."

"Good," said Elspeth Moodie.

She came by appointment and she came in style. It was a far cry from that morning, over a quarter of a century ago, when Gaddy had trudged barefoot down the park of Ottershaw to beg for a place in the parish, to throw herself upon the mercy of Sir Gilbert Bontine out of love for a foundling child.

Now the foundling drove in a handsome cabriolet pulled by two dashing geldings attended by a coachman, of the McGowan clan, who was tricked out in tan and sat up on the board with a whip in his hand, the feather in his hat, the one raffish touch to the rig, bobbing to the rhythm of the wheels on the gravel.

She was alone on the long leather-upholstered seat. The hood was down, for the day was promising fine. She wore a walking-dress of midnight-blue velvet with black cord frogging. Gloves and hat matched in shade and the colour did not seem sombre and severe but daring. She carried in her lap a rolled bag of brown kidskin which went with her when the cabriolet drew up at the front of the house, exact to the line of the stone steps. Hunter bustled to open the door but Elspeth Patterson Moodie waited, the park behind her, until Randall Bontine came to personally bid her welcome and escort her indoors.

The surprise on Randall's face made it all worth the bother, though she was not foolish or vain enough to imagine that the laird would have stepped to her bidding if she had not held aces in her hand against Gibbie. But, given that fact, she was here at Ottershaw and she was not afraid.

"You appear to be – well, Mistress Moodie," Randall said as he led her across the hall and into the long drawing-room on the ground floor.

"I am well, sir, thank you. I am very well indeed."

Randall would have made it his business to learn all that he could of her 'adventures'. He would certainly know that she had lived with the colliers of the Abbeyfield. What would make him uncertain would be the relationship between her job there and Gibbie's downfall. She could not enlighten him without revealing a great deal that he did not require to know about James's sisters and Keir Bolderon; relationships that made it all a bit less coincidental than it at first seemed. She would keep that knowledge to herself.

The woman was certainly pretty and vivacious. She was no long-nosed snob like Alicia but made her warily welcome and, after a few minutes of conversation, offered chocolate or coffee or some other refreshment appropriate to the morning hour. It would have been interesting to spend time with Suzanne Bontine and to expand politeness into friendship, perhaps; but that, Elspeth knew, could never be. Randall would not permit it, not after she had finished with him.

In due course Suzanne Bontine excused herself and left the laird and the weaver's widow alone.

The laird too had changed in the time she had been away. He had grown rather plump, had lost that honed and dangerous edge which was her memory of him. But the hooded eyes were still perceptive and sharp and she felt a little of her girlhood fear of him return for a moment as Hunter closed the drawing-room door.

The smile had gone from Randall's mouth, except for the trace of it that the scar made permanent. He stood by the fireplace, his back to the bright crackling flames, and studied her. His first question surprised her. It indicated that she was not the only one in the room who was apprehensive.

"Did Anna send you?" the laird said.

"My sister is not even aware that I am here."

"So it is not to do with that?"

"It is not," said Elspeth, and added, "not directly."

Randall Bontine seated himself, not upon a chair but upon the top of a huge wooden log-box that flanked the fireplace to the left. The morning mist had lifted and sunlight streamed through the windows, gilding the floor.

Randall squinted at her.

He said, "Then it has to do with Gilbert?"

Elspeth said, "Yes."

Randall said, "Why have you not confronted him?"

Elspeth answered, "There's no need to confront him, no point to be gained."

"It's Gibbie who owes you money, not me."

"Aye, sir, but it's you who can pay, not your brother."

"What has that clever rogue Hildebrand been tellin' you?"

"Quite enough to make me realise that my husband's fortune has been stolen."

"That's a harsh word, Mrs Moodie."

"Stolen, sir, as surely as if your brother had robbed it from a safe-box at pistol point."

Randall Bontine pursed his lips and stretched out his legs. He leaned his head against the post of the fireplace and stared past her into the sunlight. He folded his arms.

Elspeth did not press, waited until he spoke.

"What has Hildebrand told you to do?"

"Mr Hildebrand offers advice, not orders," said Elspeth.

"Is it therefore on Mr Hildebrand's *advice* that you've come to bargain with me in preference to dealing with my brother?"

"Mr Hildebrand does not wholly approve of my intention, sir, and I most certainly have not come here to bargain."

Randall got to his feet and stretched his arm along the shelf above the fireplace. He drummed his fingers nervously. The soldier's enthusiasm for conflict had diminished. His cheeks were flushed and he seemed lacking in gentlemanly assurance.

Elspeth said, "Mr Hildebrand, however, has explained the law to me. He has informed me that Mr Gilbert's bank partners have charged him with breach of the partnership agreement; is that a fact, Sir Randall?"

"Yes, they absolve themselves from blame by that manoeuvre."

"I assume that Mr Gilbert cannot, as an individual, repay the substantial sum of money which my late husband put into his trust?"

"He cannot repay you immediately, no."

"He'll make a monetary offer, a portion of the sum owing; is that it?"

"Something of the sort."

"How much?"

"You must ask—"

"Did Mr Gilbert not ask you?"

"About fifteen hundred pounds," Randall said.

Elspeth nodded; it was very close to the estimate that Mr Hildebrand had made of what Gibbie could garner from his relatives.

She went on, "Fifteen hundred pounds will not be acceptable, Sir Randall."

"Perhaps it might be raised to two thousand."

"I want it all, sir."

"Impossible."

"Within the mandatory sixty days."

"No, it's impossible. The sum went, as you are very well aware, into the coal pit at the Abbeyfield and was sunk with it."

"It wasn't sunk with it; it was sunk with Mr Fotheringham," said Elspeth. "No amount of Mr Gilbert's so-called 'investment' went into improvements or extensions on the Abbeyfield. The fact is that Mr Fotheringham cheated Mr Gilbert, and that Mr Gilbert cheated me."

Randall Bontine could find no words to refute it. She had laboured there, had known the men who had conned Gibbie into throwing his honour and his freedom into an insane gamble for profits. But the Abbeyfield and what had occurred there were immaterial to the present conversation, to the transaction that Elspeth Patterson Moodie had in mind.

Randall sat again, leaning his elbow on his knee, hand to his chin.

"I see that you intend to demand your money and assure that the peace-officers take out letters of caption against Gilbert, to ruin him," Randall said.

"No, I do not," said Elspeth.

"What, then?"

"Your brother, sir, was entrusted with funds and applied them to his own use. He would have taken the profits and not declared them either to his banking partners or to me. The construction put upon this act may be that of fraud, breach of trust or that of embezzlement under the statutes of the laws of Scotland."

"Criminal charges?"

"I'll not see your brother escape through the wide mesh of the civil courts, Sir Randall," said Elspeth. "I will pursue a charge of embezzlement against him, see him arraigned before the judges of the High Court."

"Damned if you will. Gibbie may be a fool but he's no criminal."

"He took what wasn't his."

"He – he didn't know what he was doing."

"Did he not seek your advice?" said Elspeth.

On his feet once more, Randall cried, "If the bloody man had sought my advice do you suppose I'd have let him do it?"

The more distraught the laird became the calmer Elspeth felt. She experienced no malicious satisfaction in seeing Randall Bontine brought to this stage. She did not enjoy it as a form of revenge; it was not in her nature to be vengeful. But she had learned the meaning of power and she would not flinch from using it as her father, as James, would have used it. If she had been nurtured by Gaddy and given shape by the woman, in her too ran her father's strain, undeniable in its intensity and its directness.

"You'd have prevented it, would you, laird?"

"Aye, of course I would. I'd have kicked his backside for even contemplating such a risky thing."

"Risky?" said Elspeth.

"Stupid, foolish."

"Risky because he might not get away with it?"

He spoke to her then as he might have spoken to any servant, not in fury but in reprimand. He jabbed his finger at her. "Do not bandy words with me, miss."

She did not quail from him, did not feel now even a twinge of fear for his position. She straightened and unfurled the leather roll in her lap, let him see within the folds the letters written in Mr Hildebrand's best legal copperplate.

"I'll not bandy words, laird. I'll use the law o' the land as it's given to me as well as to you an' your kind." She checked herself, spoke more slowly, letting the accents of the hill slip from her voice. "Drafts of letters, sir, which will be sent tomorrow to the Falkirk Farmers' Bank, also to the office of the Sheriff of the county who will, without doubt, respond with alacrity since the name of Bontine is invoked, even if the name of Moodie means little to him."

Randall said, "This is revenge. I can smell the stink of it."

"I've no reason to seek revenge, laird. I told you, Anna's affairs are not mine. I want only what I'm due, an' I'll not wait your pleasure to receive it."

"Under law," said Randall, "I'm not responsible for Gilbert's debts, or for his criminal behaviour towards you."

"I know it."

"Take it to *him*. See what *he* says."

"He's your full brother, Sir Randall. He's one of the last of the Bontines left in the Lennox. You'll not escape the taint of it, however it turns out."

"I had nothing—"

"You'll lose esteem, lose trust."

"You *are* blackmailing me. Damned if you're not."

"Is honour not important to you still, sir?"

"I cannot pay that sum, even if I would."

Elspeth said, "I'll accept less than the sum."

"Will you? How much less?"

"Half, or thereabouts."

"I cannot pay half, not without—" He was suddenly still, the hands still, the legs, the head twisted towards her. "What *do* you want?"

"Land," Elspeth said.

"Ottershaw land?"

"Yes."

"Never."

"All the hill land, except the tree plantations."

"Damn you, Elspeth. Never."

"From the boundary line by the Orrals to the mid-line of Drumglass; the moor above the road."

"The road?"

'The oak track."

"It's a fifth part of Ottershaw."

"Less," said Elspeth.

"Who gave *you* Ottershaw's measures?"

"They were contained among my – my husband's documents," said Elspeth.

"Moodie had the lease of the best of the upper grazing from me, and it will be continued, if you wish, for the length of the term." Randall spoke without force or conviction now; she knew that he had guessed her purpose. "No, you cannot have Ottershaw under signature. I'll not sell one acre of it, not to you or to anyone."

"Why not?"

"Because – because, damn it, I have it on trust."

It was quite the wrong word. He stopped as soon as he uttered it, let his eyelids droop.

Elspeth said, "An' my inheritance, Randall, albeit expressed in money and not land, does that not have value too? Is that not my 'trust', what I've been given, what I must use and look after?"

"It's not the same thing."

"Because I'm a woman?"

"Because you're—"

"I laboured in your fields once," said Elspeth. "My sister served in your kitchens; aye, and in your bedroom too."

"I *knew* it would come to that."

"But my husband fashioned a life out of the sweat of his brow and a determination not to be a tenant all his days. He would not settle for less, he would not—"

"Ah, it's Moodie. He left you instructions –"

"He did not. I need no instructions. I want the long tract of hill pasture from the Orrals to the shoulder of Drumglass."

Randall slapped his palm to his brow.

"The Nettleburn!" he exclaimed. "Dyers' Dyke! Of course, of course! This is sentiment, not sense. You're seeking to own your past, to eliminate the memory of—"

"Do not, sir, talk nonsense," said Elspeth. "I seek to eliminate nothing."

"But those places, they are what you want?"

"Yes."

"Where you lived once?"

"Yes, where I lived. Where my mother lived."

"Your mother! She was not your mother. I'd like to know who you really are, Mrs Elspeth Moodie. I'd like to learn your lineage and what heritage turned you into what you are."

"I'm the injured party in a dishonourable case of embezzlement, Sir Randall," said Elspeth. "That is what I am, and all that's material."

She rose, smoothing down the velvet and adjusting her hat. She rolled up the kidskin case with the letters in it and put it behind her upon the table, saying, "I'll leave these copies for you to peruse, laird. I've no doubt that your brother will wish to see them too."

"Twelve thousand pounds is a devilish and extravagant price to pay to satisfy a sentimental female whim."

Anger warmed his words and yet there was still that old ineradicable note of patronage in his tone.

Elspeth, at last, responded sharply.

"Is it sentiment to wish to buy prime grazin' land?" she retorted. "If I purchase an' improve the moor pastures I can run a thousand head of hardy sheep across them and secure a supply of wool to keep the looms of Kennart clacking for years to come."

"Sheep? What do you know of sheep?"

"Enough to make the land pay back what your brother can't."

"No, I'll not submit to it," Randall shouted. "I'll not sell off any part of Ottershaw to save that damned fool's neck. He can go to the gallows for all I care."

"Is that your last word upon it?"

"My very last word, yes."

"In that case, sir, would you be good enough to summon my carriage?" said Elspeth.

But as the laird stalked away to cry for Hunter she allowed herself a faint wry smile for she knew that guilt, Gibbie and the honour of Ottershaw would soon bring Randall Bontine round.

Winter gave her breathing-space and Moss House, in misty mornings and early dark, seemed a haven of warmth and friendliness. It was not that the mistress of the house filled it with 'society' or sought to impose herself upon the customs of the village. On the contrary Elspeth was almost as reclusive as her husband had been in the last years of his life, but with her it was done for different reasons.

Times had changed. Elspeth was aware of it. She did not need to be upon the road, show her face and make her presence felt. It was not that she was more trusting than James had been. She kept a weather-eye on all matters large and small that affected Kennart and its weavers. She was concerned too with the household purse and, while she was not niggardly in providing creature comforts for herself and her children, she did not immediately embark upon a programme of change and alteration. She was content for that cold season to reside in James's house, to adjust to it even though the memories from time to time brought pain.

Moss House was snug and comfortable. The girls revelled in its freedoms, spent the dreary wet days of late November playing by the coal fire in the parlour or bouncing about on the bed in the upstairs chamber or, to Tolland's annoyance, sat by the grate in the kitchen and chattered to the new cook, Mrs Grayling, who was a kindly soul and encouraged them. There was a maid too, not new but 'restored', for Betty had brought herself back when she heard of Elspeth's return. She tended the children now that they were grown with the same firmness as she had looked after Mary Jean as an infant. And there was the coachman, McGowan, and plans to employ a tutor for school instruction after Christmas was over.

Anna and Robert came to tea, came to dinner, came over from Drymen on a Sunday afternoon, as if they were already married and had been 'respectable' for years. Robbie romped about and had the freedom of the house and played blindman's-buff and hunt-the-cat with the girls, for Sarah Bennet had slipped back to taste the pleasures of a childhood missed, and seldom, to Elspeth's knowledge, mooned over her 'lost' sister or the kin she had left on the Abbeyfield.

It was Mr Hildebrand, of course, who brought the news from far-flung quarters. He came frequently to Moss House and talked of purchasing a house in Balfron, for his business in Dumbarton had dwindled so much time had he spent with clients in the spur of the Lennox, and he was growing too long in the tooth to make the journey up the lochside in the sleet and snow. Mr Hildebrand brought news that Randall Bontine had agreed to meet Elspeth's terms, at least in part. Mr Hildebrand acted as go-between in drawing up the agreements of purchase, and haggled for Elspeth over the disposition of the farm of Dyers' Dyke which Sir Randall sought to keep in his possession since the Macfarlanes were well settled there.

To show that she was not stubborn Elspeth had let the farm remain as part of Ottershaw but had insisted on fencing it off, leaving a mere forty acres about the buildings and keeping water rights in the original deed of purchase. She would take possession of the lands and properties above the oak track on the 1st of May and discussed with Robert Rudge how she could juggle credit to buy breeding rams and with John Scarf where such animals could best be obtained.

Mr Hildebrand also brought news from Strachan, told how Gibbie had sought to sue Hector Fotheringham, in spite of Randall's advice to the contrary, and how the Brothers Pryde had withdrawn their charge against him but had asked for his resignation in exchange for a nominal payment; how the Moodie sisters – her aunts, though only Elspeth knew it – had finally surrendered to the inevitable and written off the fees that the venture had cost them; and how the manager of the coal pit had transferred his interest from engineering to mercantile trading and was, so Mr Hildebrand had heard, employed in some warehouse in Leith.

From Matt, from Mouse came no word at all.

Mary Jean – Sarah too – presented a problem in the matter of the lie. It was not in Elspeth's nature to encourage young children to be deceivers but now and then Mary Jean would, in all innocence, let out some remark about Matt that would bring a frown of bewilderment to Anna's face.

Finally Elspeth took the bull by the horns.

The coal fire burned bright in the bedroom and the lamp was like a great round yellow moon on the table by the window. The girls were in their night attire, kneeling upon the bed while Betty sorted out their new-washed underclothing for the morning. Elspeth entered and asked Betty to go downstairs and take supper with cook and Mr Tolland. She settled with the girls upon the bed, drawing them to her affectionately.

"We're going to make a pretend," she began.

"Stories?" said Mary Jean.

"Yes, a story; our story."

"What sort o' story, Mammy?"

"We're going to pretend that Matt's dead and gone to Heaven."

"Is he?" Sarah stiffened and clasped at Elspeth's hand. "Has it—"

Elspeth shook her head. She made a secret little sign with her eyes to Sarah who was quite old enough to understand the need for secrets.

"Matt's with Mousie," said Mary Jean. "Has Mousie gone t' Heaven wi' him?"

Elspeth said, "No, dearest, but there are bad people who would like to find Matt and—"

"*What* bad people?"

Sarah said, "We'll pretend, Mary Jean, eh?"

"Pretend there's bad people?"

"Aye."

How fine it would be, Elspeth thought, if one had to pretend that there was wickedness in the world, if she could be again as she had been when she was young and lived with Gaddy high on the slopes of the hill. But Mary Jean was not without guile and Sarah, as close to her as a sister, could always cajole her and impress her.

Sarah went on, "If everybody thinks Matt's gone t' Heaven nobody will wonder where he is, see?"

Mary Jean nodded vigorously.

Elspeth began to wonder if she was doing the right thing by her daughter, if this tiny deception would not somehow swell and grow into a monstrous lie. She had experienced that process and was frightened of it.

As if picking up the thought from her mother, Mary Jean said, "Aunt Anna asks me 'bout Matt."

"Does she?" Elspeth was not surprised. "What do you tell her?"

"Tell her I loved him," said Mary Jean.

"What else?"

"Tell her he went away wi' Mousie."

"Sarah, is that true?" said Elspeth.

Sarah said, "I told Mrs Sinclair he went away for ever, told her it's what we told Mary Jean."

Elspeth sat back on her heels on the bed. It was such a simple lie that she could not have devised it. She smiled at Sarah and drew the girl to her, stroked her hair, while Mary Jean, not to be left out, rubbed herself amicably against her mother and patted her knee with her hand.

"There, there, Mammy," she said.

"Was that no' right?" said Sarah.

"Perfectly right," said Elspeth.

If only it was so easy to be rid of unpleasant things, to pass them off as lightly as a child does. But memories are stubborn, Elspeth thought, and must be harboured in the heart for good or ill while friends and kindred who once seemed to be the core and centre of life became lost among them, like ewes in the forest.

Rising, clapping her hands, she said, "Into bed."

"Mammy, tell us—"

"Not tonight, dearest. It's far too late for wee lassies to be up. Quick now, into bed."

Mary Jean scrambled under the covers and pulled the blankets up to her nose.

"Sarah, come on," she whispered.

But Sarah lingered and Elspeth sensed that something was troubling the elder girl. She leaned forward and took her hand. "What is it, Sarah?"

"I think about Davy an' our Mouse sometimes. I canna help it," Sarah confessed.

"Do you miss them?"

"Aye."

It was on the tip of Elspeth's tongue to ask if she missed the Abbeyfield, the stink and suffocating darkness of the pit, the back-breaking labour of hauling the sleds; if release from that harrowing existence had not been worth the sacrifices. But the question, however gently put, would have been cruel. Instead she gave the girl another hug.

Sarah said, "You'll not send me back, will you?"

"Don't be daft, Sarah," said Elspeth. "You can stay here with us for as long as you like."

"For ever?"

"Until some young man comes along an' asks you to be his wife," said Elspeth.

Sarah gave a little sigh as if that prospect touched her with its appeal, as if, perhaps, she had some young man already in mind and would live with the hope of it all coming true in the end.

Elspeth left the girls giggling together under the covers and went along the corridor to the stairs.

The house seemed empty now that the servants were gathered in the kitchen. Tonight she felt the presence of James here, not his force, that threatening and obsessional passion which she had feared and hated and which had driven her away, but his loneliness. She shivered slightly as she crossed the hall to the drawing-room.

Lamps were lighted, the fire burned on an empty sort of elegance. She longed to go down to the kitchen, to sit at the big wooden table with Tom Tolland, cook and Betty and share their supper and their companionship. But she could not. She was their mistress and her appearance in the kitchen would disconcert and inhibit them, would be unseemly.

In twenty minutes or half an hour she might reasonably ring the bell and Tom Tolland would serve her dinner in the dining-room where a place had been set at the top of the long, polished table. He might even linger for a moment or two of conversation before he realised his position and left her to eat in peace, to eat alone.

To Elspeth's chagrin he did not reply at once. Indeed, he did not reply at all.

At first she was bewildered and disappointed, believed that her letter must have gone astray upon the road. She was tempted to write to him again but realised that if he had received her first communication and had chosen to ignore it then a second letter would make her seem foolish. She wondered if the formal tone of the original had put him off. She had expressed in it no more than a polite enquiry as to his welfare but had requested his assistance on a practical matter and promised him payment in accordance with the degree of service which he was able to render.

Perhaps he wanted no more to do with her in any circumstances. Perhaps he had found himself an Edinburgh wife.

As casually as possible she asked Mr Hildebrand for news.

Mr Hildebrand had no news to give. Besides, Mr Hildebrand was just a mite less conscientious than usual that snell season for he was nursing a crop of chilblains and a dripping head cold. In any case, he did not comprehend Mrs Moodie's interest in the fellow, for she had neglected to tell the lawyer of her plans and had failed to mention that she had written to the man at all.

Christmas came merrily enough. New Year too. January brought a spell of biting cold, snow towards the end of the month. For a day or two the girls enjoyed the wintry weather. Even Robbie, on a Sunday visit, grasped the principle of making a man out of snow, though his main pleasure in the act seemed to be in knocking the poor snowman's head off as soon as Sarah placed it upon the trunk. But the girls soon grew bored and cross with snow and ice and voluntarily confined themselves to the house and drove Elspeth and the servants mad with their restless energy.

In mid-February rain washed away the snow and a warm wind over the loch brought a thaw. Elspeth drove the girls down to Kennart to stare in awe at the great brown torrent of the Lightwater and to hear the mill wheel thump and thrash in the lade. But Mary Jean did not like such wild din and spectacle and cried and cried until Robert Rudge lifted her and carried her upstairs to his rickety office and fed her ginger candy and let her dabble in the inkpots and spoil half a ream of best quality writing-paper. Sarah, though, was impressed by Kennart's collective industry. She would have wandered about the place, from the forge to the quaking room full of looms and spindles, all day if Elspeth had not coaxed her away, afraid that somehow her ward would come to harm.

March came in calm and grey and patient. Elspeth had not forgotten that she had written the letter but by now she expected no reply. She did not think of him very much except in the late evening hour when she sat alone in the dining-room with empty chairs about her and pondered on why it was that independence had not brought her freedom and why she could not settle to enjoy her privacy and peace. Summer, she told herself, would bring novel occupations, such a mass of things to do that the days – and the nights – would pass in a twinkling and she would not feel that thin little hurt any longer. She would seek out another man to cost the work for her, to execute it too if he was keen and able and agreed to her price.

It was a Wednesday in mid-March. The weather was not bright but it was dry and warm enough for Robbie and the girls to be out upon the lawns, with Betty keeping an eye on them. Robert had had the carpenter at Kennart fashion three little golf sticks and had had John Scarf find a box of feathery balls and the girls and Robbie, shrieking with laughter, were whisking and whacking away to the detriment of the lawn's smooth surface and to the peril of the windows. From time to time, from their chairs in the drawing-room, Elspeth and Anna would see the shape of a child shoot past the window or would look out at some group among the shrubs, three heads bowed in concentration, with Betty not far off.

If confession was good for the soul then Anna, these last few months, had cleansed herself to the point of purity. She was boringly self-concerned, would chatter on to Elspeth about all her loves and losses and talk of men, men, men until Elspeth would feel her head spin and long for her sister to step into marriage and motherhood in the hope that it would take her mind off the triumphs and disasters of her formative years.

"I was young, of course," said Anna. "I knew no better. But I canna say that I was taken advantage of, if you see what I mean. I mean, Matt was one thing but Randall Bontine was another. Just as well, I sometimes think, that Mammy died when she did. I mean, not that she died, do not misunderstand me, 'Pet, but that she died when she did. Doubt if I'd have had the brass neck to let Randall seduce me if Mammy had been about. I was vulnerable, is that no' the word, at that period. Matt was all very well, very amorous, of course, an' mad in love with me but I was too young t' resist a man like Randall."

"Did you try very hard, Anna?"

"Try very hard? How could I have tried harder? I was doomed, y' might say, from the day he first cast eyes on me, when our lips first met. Remember?"

"Yes, I remember," said Elspeth.

She had other things to do, details of business to attend to, but she had not the heart to be brusque with her sister. She wondered, though, how many days she must waste over the years listening to Anna talk about herself.

"I mean, I did it for Matt. In a manner o' speakin'. If I hadn't given in to the laird there's no sayin' what would have happened t' Matt."

"It did not turn out well for Matt in any event," said Elspeth.

"An' what do y' mean by that?"

Quickly Elspeth said, "Matt did not hold it against you, Anna."

"Did he tell you as much?"

"Many times. He always spoke of you with, with affection."

"He loved me, Matt did. But he was spoiled, in my opinion."

"Perhaps he was," said Elspeth.

Through the drawing-room window she watched Mary Jean take a huge, awkward swipe with her golf stick and somehow manage to propel the ball, high and whirring, over the hedge and into the onion beds.

Anna went on, "It's hard for you t' understand, 'Pet. I had too passionate a nature for my own good. I see that now. Not like you. Always chalk an' cheese, you an' me. I mean, I'd never have wed a man like Jamie Moodie – oh, pardon me; I didn't mean . . . In any case, you canna blame the laird for wantin' me, seein' me in an' out of his room every day."

Anna paused. She leaned forward and selected a finger of yellow cake from the tray on the table and put it into her mouth. Elspeth watched her chew. She was still beautiful but the emptiness in her showed sometimes in her eyes which became quite vacant for split seconds of time as if nothing much filled her head now.

Anna sipped tea from a flower-sprigged china cup.

"Have y' seen Sandy Sinclair of late?" she asked.

In fact Elspeth had seen Sandy only five days ago when, rather to her surprise, she had found him in the kitchen chatting with Tolland and eating a veal pie, his garron tied up by the wall that kept the moorland from invading the gardens.

"He – yes, he seems quite settled on Ottershaw."

"I hear Gibbie's off t' Ireland."

"So I hear, yes," said Elspeth.

"Packed off by Randall, like as not, after that stramash wi' the bank."

Elspeth waited for Anna to put a question to her, to enquire about her plans for the stretch of land that she had acquired or to praise her for her astuteness in persuading Randall Bontine to part with it. But Anna seemed incapable of associating her sister with Ottershaw in any way at all.

Anna said, "Lachlan's returnin' to Ottershaw. You'd hear that from Sandy too?"

Elspeth nodded.

Anna said, "Did he ask after me? Sandy?"

Elspeth said, "No, no he didn't."

"Oh!" said Anna.

She dabbed her mouth with a lace-fringed napkin and stared out of the window again.

"Robbie's gettin' tall," she said. "Quite grown up."

Robert Rudge had dropped Anna and the boy off from his gig soon after noon and had promised to return for them by five o'clock, on his return from the bleachfields at Balfron where he had business of some sort that afternoon.

Elspeth glanced at the clock. It was not yet three. She felt impatient, restless, and was frightened that she might quarrel with Anna before the man's return. She tried to occupy her mind with thoughts of all the things that she would have to do tomorrow to make up for the 'social' afternoon in her sister's company, thought too that Anna had got more than she properly deserved in the patronage of Robert Rudge, for the reprobate was thoroughly reformed, it seemed, and hell bent on marriage. She listened to the clock, to the whisper of the pendulum and the *tock-tock-tock* of the weight in its case.

Anna said, "I'm surprised he didn't ask after me. Sandy, I mean."

Elspeth said, "He only dropped in for a bite to eat, Anna, since he was in this quarter. He really had very little t' say for—"

The drawing-room door opened, not thrown open but opened with a swing and a creak. She glanced around. Sarah was there, boots muddy, cheeks red with the spring air, her eyes round and more solemn and brown than Elspeth had ever seen them before.

Elspeth got to her feet, held out a hand to the girl.

"What is it, Sarah? Do you want somethin' to eat?"

Hesitantly Sarah stepped forward. It must be something unusual to have brought her directly into the drawing-room. She was a careful girl and would surely have cleaned her boots before crossing the polished hall let alone venturing on to the carpet. In one hand she still clutched the stout little golf stick all smeared and gouted with earth.

Anna hardly seemed to notice the girl. She regarded her entry as a distraction, an interruption to the flow of her conversation. She gave a small *tut*, murmured, "Dirty feet. Dirty feet indoors," and transferred her attention to the plate of yellow cake once more.

Sarah came to Elspeth's side.

Elspeth stooped, her skirts rustling.

"Sarah, what's wrong?"

"It's – it's him," Sarah whispered.

"Who?"

"Come int' our garden."

"Who, Sarah?"

"Mr Bolderon." Sarah burst into a flood of tears. "Mr Bolderon's come t' take me away."

It was at once clear that she had misjudged his circumstances. He was not as she had imagined him to be, all down-at-heel and shabby. There was no evidence of neglect about his person. His cuffs and collar were not frayed or grubby, his coat showed no button strings or coarse patches. His hat had even been blocked and brushed and his shoes shone like two pieces of parrot coal. He was, of course, disconcerted by the effect of his sudden appearance on Sarah Bennet and was profuse in his apologies.

"I really had no notion that I would frighten her so."

Elspeth had hurried to the door before Tolland could come from the servants' hall, had found Keir Bolderon upon the path. Betty was hovering close to him, scowling. Robbie was clinging to her skirts. But Mary Jean was smiling and peeping up at the Abbeyfield manager as if she thought that he might have a fat pony in his pocket and might offer her, there and then, another ride upon its back.

The concern in his eyes seemed genuine. Elspeth had an arm wrapped around Sarah and held her against her skirts.

"She thinks you've come to take her back," Elspeth said.

"Oh, dear, dear. No, no. Please explain to her that I am here by invitation."

Betty came forward, stood, still scowling, by the step while Elspeth explained to Sarah that Mr Bolderon was manager of the Abbeyfield no longer and had no power over them now. Though she remained shaken, Sarah was reassured.

Betty said, "Shall I look after her, Mrs Moodie?"

"Yes, go in with Betty." Elspeth kissed the girl on the brow. "You too, Mary Jean. And Robbie. You may all have some extra cake."

The children were shepherded indoors while Anna, sensing that something unusual was going on, entered the hallway from the drawing-room and loitered there, listening. She caught Keir Bolderon's attention. He was intrigued by the sight of the dark-haired woman and swayed on the balls of his feet to see more of her.

Elspeth was annoyed at the confusion which Keir Bolderon's unexpected arrival had caused. It should have been an occasion of dignified formality. If only he had written to declare his intention to call upon her, she would have made sure that the children were out of the way, that Tolland was in his uniform and that she had been dressed rather more splendidly. The sight of her raised up would have put him at a disadvantage and allowed her to steer the first moments of their meeting more effectively. None of it was possible now. Indeed, Anna would insinuate herself, negotiate an introduction to the mysterious and handsome stranger who had come to visit her sister, would flirt and charm him.

To Keir Bolderon Elspeth said, "May I take it that you did, in fact, receive my letter?"

"Yes, and I must offer an apology for not replyin' to it," said Keir Bolderon. "I did not wish to give a commitment to your undertaking until I was sure of my own position."

"What is your position, Mr Bolderon?"

"I am employed, presently, by the McNeil family of Leith."

"As a mining engineer?"

"Hardly that," said Keir Bolderon.

Elspeth waited but he did not embellish on the exact nature of his occupation.

She said, "Was there nothing left for you at the Abbeyfield?"

He answered, "Nothing at all. It may, however, interest you to know that the pit has been sealed and that a minister was brought to consecrate the ground for the sake of those who lie buried."

Elspeth nodded; she had heard as much from Mr Hildebrand.

She said, "I'm glad it was done in a Christian manner. I take it there was no trace of—"

"No trace of anything or anyone in that filthy sand," said Keir Bolderon. "It may be of small consolation to you but I thank God that so few lives were lost."

Elspeth was aware of Anna in the hallway, hovering like a hawk.

"Mr Bolderon," said Elspeth, "have you come to take on the piece of work which I offered?"

"I cannot say, not until I've surveyed the requirements."

"Will you do so now?"

"If you wish."

"Wait here, please," said Elspeth.

She stepped back into the house, leaving Keir Bolderon to cool his heels upon the path outside. She closed the door a little and swung round. She was harried by the desire to get him away from Moss House, from Anna, from the fuss of conventional introductions. Sensing her sister's anxiety, Anna smiled and made a sign of approval, fluttering her fingers before her face like a feather fan. "Who on earth is *he*? Is he one o' your dark secrets, 'Pet?"

"Mr Bolderon is an *engineer*, if you must know."

She signalled to Tolland who brought her coat and bonnet from the cupboard and handed them to her. She wore slippers not shoes but the weather was dry and she would not take time to change them. She did not understand why she felt so pressed and nervous.

Anna said, "Are y' not goin' to bring him in?"

"Mr Bolderon is a man of many interests," said Elspeth, as she tied the ribbons on her bonnet. "He'll not have time to waste in Balnesmoor."

"Such nonsense!" said Anna. "Bring him in, 'Pet, till I get a proper look at him."

"Anna, do not interfere. I have business with Mr Bolderon. Plain business. Do you understand me?"

"Nah, 'Pet. I've never understood you." Anna chuckled and shook her head. "Still, if business is what you want, I'll keep the bairns out o' harm's way till you return."

Stiffly Elspeth signalled to Tolland to open the door. She swept out. She beckoned to Mr Bolderon to follow her as she hurried down the path and through the gate into the road. She was relieved to be screened from Moss House by the hedges. Anna would be at the window, watching, speculating.

The meeting with Keir Bolderon was not at all as she had visualised it. She regretted the impulse that had made her write that letter in the first place. What she had she could not lose. In an insecure world she had acquired a degree of security that few women could ever hope to attain. Why did she risk being hurt and rejected, being deceived by this man, by any man? She felt resentment grow in her. Could she not settle for independence? Must she invent a project that would bring Keir Bolderon to Balnesmoor and keep him here for months? Why could she not be happy with what she had gained?

"I'm sorry I intruded without warning, Mrs Moodie."

"Why do you call me that?"

"It's your name, is it not?"

"Indeed, it is my name. But why do *you* call me by it? Was 'Elspeth' only my name when I worked for you?"

She knew she was being childish and churlish but she could not break the mood, remained angry with him for catching her off guard.

Keir Bolderon said, "I'll call you by any name that pleases you."

"Oh, do not be so – so ingratiating. I cannot abide that in a man."

"Can you not," he said, quietly, a statement not a question.

Elspeth marched on, letting him skip to keep in step with her.

She headed along the top road towards the cottages at the

Bonnywell, but broke off into the lane by the Black Bull before she reached the pump. She did not want to give the girls and women there too much to gossip about, for it was not proper for a lady to walk out with a stranger. She was vividly aware of familiar scenes, as if having Keir Bolderon by her side had revived them for her; over there, the kirk; there the kirkyard wall and the place where her family lay at rest. The cottages where James and his sisters had laboured were occupied still by weavers, though very impoverished and dismal they were, and the smoke still rose from the cottage chimneys against the flat, patient backcloth of the hills.

She turned into the lane, walking very quickly.

Keir Bolderon skipped and turned with her, not at all sure whether he was expected to keep step in step by her side or to follow behind like a lackey.

"May I – may I ask where we are goin'?" he said, at length.

"To inspect the site of the work," Elspeth said.

"Ah, yes, of course."

She had walked this lane so often when she was a girl, carrying water and milk from Dyers'-Dyke to the hut. She associated it with Gaddy and Coll, with poor Peter Docherty who had loved her and had been loyal but was in the end too weak to save himself from drink. Never had Elspeth felt the din and clamour of the past ring so loud within her. She turned from the lane into the oak track. Bare thorn hedges and the unleafed trees flanked the track but did not screen from view the line of moor and hill. She strode on over the winter litter to the sound of rooks cawing and the distant roaring of a bullock from the valley.

Keir Bolderon settled to her pace. Occasionally he would glance at her but he put no more questions and meekly let her lead him on. If he was puzzled or disturbed by her unusual behaviour he gave no sign of it.

She arrived at the field gate, not the old broken-down gate that she remembered but a new one of stout, clean timbers with posts so recently planted that they had not yet acquired a silky green patina and capping of moss. An iron chain was clenched about the post. She put her hand to it as if she expected it to break at her touch.

"Allow me, Elspeth, if you will."

Keir Bolderon found the hook-link, unclipped it from its clasp and pulled the gate open. He let Elspeth enter the field and followed her. He closed the gate carefully behind him, and chained it again.

The hill of Drumglass reared to the west. The hump-backed gable of Dumgoyne was visible too. The moor undulated upwards into the sky. The scar that marked the site of the hut on the Nettleburn was still discernible, though skeletal bracken and rank weeds hid most of it now.

Elspeth stopped. "Here."

"Here?"

"I was raised here, in a sheep-hut."

"Ah!"

"Now I'm owner of all the land your eye can see, from the woods to the sky." She did not speak directly to Keir Bolderon. He stood behind her, by her shoulder. "It's mine. I bought it from the laird. I own it."

Keir Bolderon said, "What will you do with it?"

"Raise sheep on it."

"Elspeth, why did you send for me?"

"I require a person who can manage the land for me."

"I'm no farmer, Elspeth."

"I want it brought back."

"Brought back?" said Keir Bolderon.

"She came over that hill," said Elspeth, pointing. "My mother. She died here. I was found here. I was raised here. I was—"

He touched a hand to her shoulder.

He still carried the man's smell upon him, distinctive but not strong, not unpleasant. He did not reek of byre or tavern and his touch was gentle. She could see his fingers out of the corner of her eye and was surprised at how scarred they were, just like Coll Cochran's or Lachlan Sinclair's. She wanted to turn to him, to have him hold her. But she could not yield, would not submit to the need. She clung stubbornly to a last illusion of freedom, to the old falsehoods that had become the only truths in which she could believe. She did not know how to explain it or why, of all men, he should be the one.

She said, "I want the bogs drained. I want walls built. I want woods to shelter my ewes and stone huts to protect the lambs. I want potato shaws to green the bare ground an' barley to grow instead of bracken. I want—"

"Tell me what you want, Elspeth."

"I want to build a house, a fine stone house here on the Nettleburn."

"What's to prevent you?"

She stepped away from him, walked three or four paces. The grass was thin under her slippers and the hem of her skirt had become heavy with moisture soaked up from ground that looked dry. She felt slender and small under the vastness of the Balnesmoor, unprotected by her dreams.

She turned to him, snapped, "What do you know of it?"

"Oh, stop it," Keir Bolderon told her. "Stop fussing, for God's sake. Do you suppose I'm so much different from you, Elspeth Patterson? Do you think I was born into privilege? I came from a hovel so cramped and filthy that you could scarce breathe in it. My daddy was a labourer, his daddy before him. They slaved for the sake of the family, to scratch enough to feed seven hungry mouths. I saw that as love. But was my daddy respected for breaking his back in the service of a man who could not tell a corn rig from a pod of peas? No, he was despised for his loyalty, my daddy, as we are all despised."

"Where is he now?"

"Oh, dead," said Keir Bolderon. "His daughters are married, his sons dispersed to founder or aspire as suits their natures."

"What is your nature, Mr Bolderon?"

"To aspire."

"To marry well, to live at ease on your wife's fortune?"

"I'm not the sort who will be idle, whoever I marry."

"Are you not well provided for in this trading-house in Leith?"

"I'm no damned trader. There's profit but no progress in that occupation."

"As there was on the Abbeyfield?" said Elspeth.

"On the Abbeyfield I had hopes," said Keir Bolderon. "But my natural ambitions were turned against me."

"Is that why you courted me, for the influence my money would give you?"

"Yes, I wanted your money."

"I think I should inform you, Mr Bolderon, that I am well protected against the predations of a husband. I have secured my fortune and my estate, such as it is, against the *jus mariti* by vesting it in a trustee, my lawyer, Mr Hildebrand. Any man who marries me will not have control of my money."

Keir Bolderon nodded as if he had expected no less of her.

He said, "I wanted your money, and then I wanted you."

"Which is it, Mr Bolderon?"

"Both."

Elspeth said, "Why did you not come at once when I invited you?"

"I did not know what to do."

"What was best for you, do you mean?"

"What might be best for both of us."

"Did you doubt that I was good enough for you?"

"God, no! Not that. It did not seem – honest, somehow."

"Does it seem more honest now?"

"As honest as I can make it, Elspeth."

She said, "What will you do for me, Mr Bolderon?"

"Build your house, for one thing."

"Is that all?"

"Whatever else you ask of me that I can do, I will do."

"And the rest?" said Elspeth.

Keir Bolderon was silent. He rubbed his mouth with his hand. He would not yield, could not yield any more than she could. They were true-born Scots and intractable in their loving.

She waited, eyes upon his face.

The wind came ruffling over the crown of the hill and stirred the wasted grasses, moved the boughs of the oaks and the tiny dead leaves that snuggled in the bramble hedge. It brought to her all the small noises of the valley, the sounds from Balnesmoor and the parks of Ottershaw all smoored and mingled and soft as rain.

She would wait no more, give him no more opportunity.

She swept past him, downhill, down towards the field gate and the track through the oaks. Damn him, she would build her own stone house, fence her own fields, tend her own flocks. She did not need Keir Bolderon.

She reached the gate, fumbled with the hook-link, shaking it with terrible impatience, shaking and shaking it so that it rattled but would not part. In despair she sank against the gatepost, knowing that he was still above her, motionless and indecisive upon the edge of the moor by the broken ground.

She did not, however, dare to look back.

"Elspeth."

She started when he put his arm about her and held her, held her firmly but tenderly so that she could not escape him on any account. He stretched about her and slipped the link and let the chain fall free. He pushed the gate open.

"Go," he said. "Go on."

She sighed. She leaned against him, her head upon his chest, his arm still about her waist.

"Ask me," Elspeth said. "Please, ask me."

"Ask you what?"

"About the terms of the marriage contract."

He said nothing for such a while that Elspeth peeped up at him. He was smiling.

"How much will it pay me?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Elspeth.

"In which case I accept," Keir Bolderon said and, with a loving hand, lifted her face to his kiss.

Creature Comforts

No one envies or hates one of his own party; even the devils love one another in their way; they torment one another for reasons other than hate or envy; these are only employed against the just.

William Blake

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ONE

Men and Wives

Anna had bought him the monkey as a pet but to her disgust he had made of it a surrogate child. Clad in a tiny hand-stitched vest of blue cotton and a pair of nankin breeks the little creature, hardly larger than a tabby cat, perched on Matt's shoulder, chattering amicably and nibbling a piece of bacon rind which the young man had draped behind his ear.

Shirtless and barefoot, Matt sprawled in the box chair before a blazing fire. The kitchen was as hot as sin for it was Matt's habit to pile logs and soft coal so high upon the hearth that it was all Anna could do to sidle close enough to hang a pot on the chain or find a place for the kettle on the hob. When she accused him of being wasteful, Matt took umbrage and declared that she had no feelings; had Jacko not been born in the tropics and how could he be expected to survive a Scottish winter without a bit of pampering? Jacko was only an excuse for self-indulgence. Matt had always been fond of toasting his big, muscular body and now that he was master in his own home he saw no reason to deny himself the pleasure.

Thirty months of marriage had schooled Anna in dealing with her husband's foibles. Thirty months of marriage to Matt Sinclair had so coarsened her that, for the most part, she was unaware of the tense, graceless state of their relationship. She attributed her husband's moodiness to the fact that she had not borne him a son. If only she could conceive, she believed, Matt would instantly mend his ways and become loving and considerate. Even so, Anna was not altogether anxious to stumble into the pitfall of motherhood. Young though she was, just touching twenty in that spring of 1812, Anna's instincts told her that the error of an ill-wrought marriage could not be erased by love alone or by dividing what love there was with an innocent bairn.

It was all her sister Elspeth's fault. If at one time Elspeth had not been so damnably struck on Matt Sinclair, then she, Anna, would not have teased and trapped him into making fumbling love to her in the trees below the Nettleburn. Out of that act and out of her compulsive confession of it, disasters followed like stones clattering downhill.

Mammy had dragged her straight to the Sinclairs' house. Outraged and ashamed, the Sinclairs had been stung into agreeing on a hasty wedding. Banishment to the gloomy old cottage in the pine wood had followed and now it seemed Matt's prospects for advancement had been left to tarnish and rust. As if she had not woes enough, she had been daft enough to be taken in by a packman and to buy Matt a monkey!

Rain had drizzled across the country for weeks and it was rare enough, even in fine weather, to find one of the travelling kind on Ottershaw. Matt's father, grieve of the policies, gave strangers short shrift. But there he was, with his snap hat and moleskins soaked to the colour of ink, when she jerked open the door to the unexpected knock.

Drenched or not, the packman grinned cheerfully.

"Well?" Anna demanded.

"Buy a song-bird, leddy?"

From a pole balanced on the mannie's shoulder dangled two wicker cages, in each of which huddled a couple of canaries as drab and dank as their captor but lacking his professional chirrup.

"Good God, man, our woods hereabouts are alive wi' birds," said Anna scornfully.

"Aye, but mine are exotics."

"Get awa' wi' ye! Exotics indeed!"

"Buy one an' it'll repay its cost wi' a warblin' that will make your heart soar."

"It'll make my heart sore, right enough, when I find it stiff on its back come the mornin'."

The traveller squinted past her at the blazing fire and bubbling pots but Anna had no charity to spare and did not invite him in out of the rain. In fact she was on the point of slamming the door, since he clearly carried no trinkets or ribbons to entice her, when she noticed the paw.

"What," said Anna, "is that?"

"A monkey."

From the vee of the man's jacket struggled a sad little grey face.

"Is it a real one?"

"Livin' an' breathin', all the way from Guinea," said the packman. "He's of the capuchin breed. I call him Jacko."

"Let me see."

Instantly the packman clapped a protective hand upon the sombre hood. "Nah, nah, mistress Jack's no' for sale. See the pretty wee songsters instead."

Blinking, Jacko stretched out his arms to Anna as if beseeching her to rescue him from endless roads and interminable rain.

"I'll give you five shillin' for the monkey."

She was aware that the packman might have trudged to Pine Cottage for no other purpose than to trick her into buying the monkey. Perhaps he had heard, while drinking in the Ramshead or the Bull, of the young man on Ottershaw who had a passion for taming wild creatures. It was true that Matt had kept martens and squirrels in cages but they had died quickly in captivity in spite of Matt's care, or because of it.

Anna did not wish to seem gullible but her caution was set against a desperate longing to cuddle the sad little creature to her breast.

She heard herself say, "Eight shillin'."

The offer was extravagant – three weeks' work in the dairy did not earn her such a sum – but she had a few pounds saved from her mother's legacy, money hidden in a stocking in her cupboard, money Matt knew nothing about. He would skin her alive, though, if ever he learned what she had paid for the gift, no matter how much he liked it.

"Ten shillin', take it or run awa'."

"I'll take it."

The packman scooped the capuchin from his jacket and handed it over to Anna. Tail wrapped around her arms, paws like hooks, Jacko clung to the girl, shivering. He smelled, Anna soon discovered, a great deal less appealing than he looked. Even so, she hugged him sentimentally to herself while she went into the cottage, fished out the ten shillings and paid it to the packman who went away, whistling.

Matt was overjoyed with the gift. He kissed Anna to show his gratitude but gave her little enough attention after that, distracted by Jacko's antics. It did not take him long to establish rapport with the animal or for Jacko to become impudent and spoiled.

By Christmas Anna detested the wee brute and cursed the impulse which had urged her to part with good coin to bring him into her life.

Matt Sinclair and his precious Guinea monk were star turns at the Ramshead and the Black Bull. Jacko was enormously popular with the men who gathered in the drinking dens. Jacko would perch on his shoulder and cling to his untidy blond hair and be petted by the boozers. Jacko, in fact, was popular with everybody except Anna and Matt's father; Lachlan Sinclair disapproved of 'alien stock' and the time his son wasted in aimless play.

Over the months Jacko became a source of considerable vexation to Anna. He cheated her of pleasurable hours of peace between her return from work at the dairy and Matt's arrival from the wooded slopes of Drumglass. Jacko, however, was crafty. He kept out of Anna's way when they were alone in the cottage. He would hide up in the beams or hang from the saddle-rail by his tail and spit cherry stones at her or even make water lightly on her hair, swooping and skipping away before the tide of her wrath. If she complained to Matt, her husband simply laughed and informed her that all monks were mischievous. Jacko did not absorb all of Matt's attention, however. Not even the monkey could distract young Sinclair from devising schemes for personal advancement. On that drizzling night in early April, Matt was at it again, chasing yet another rainbow.

"For eighty pounds I could buy enough stock an' all the furnishin's we'd need for a holdin' of our own," Matt said. "We could be shot o' this place as soon as we found a vacant steadin' with a bit o' land attached."

"Aye, so we could," said Anna.

"I'd give an arm an' a leg to watch my father's chops fall when I hand him a quit notice."

"Aye, so would I," said Anna.

Matt stretched one long leg and wiggled his toes, staring at his foot as if wondering how he might dance his way to independence. "Eighty pounds would set us up."

"Aye, so it would," said Anna.

She had removed her heavy skirt and blouse and was comfortable in spite of the heat in the room. Provided Matt had something to turn in his mind he would not notice that she was idle. Once he tired of the daydream, though, he would bark at her to stir her lazy derry, to make the bed, sew a tear in his shirt or even scour the pots with sand. Matt could not bear to see her enjoy a few brief moments of leisure and ease. He had been ruined by his saintly mother, Aileen Sinclair, who was never idle. When she found it necessary to pay a visit to the earth closet, she took with her a small piece of sewing, as if she considered it a mortal sin to sit even there, without domestic occupation. If Aileen Sinclair was not sewing, she would be cooking or cleaning or beating wet clothes or tramping her old spinning-wheel or, if all else was squared away, she would vigorously curry the poor old kitchen cat to keep it free of fleas. To Anna's way of thinking, such an obsession with industry was a frightful affliction which menfolk had no right to condone, let alone encourage.

"At this sale," Matt droned on, "the gear'll go cheap."

In the past eighteen months Anna had been shown dozens of bills and how Matt had heard that the stuff would go cheap was beyond her for the farm in question was at Blairgowrie which was miles away across the Water of Tay in remote Perthshire.

"Aye, if only we could raise some bloody capital," said Matt, "it would give us an opportunity to change our lives."

Realising what was coming next, Anna gave herself a little shake to prepare herself for acrimony. Carefully Matt removed Jacko from his shoulder and set the monkey on his knee where it squatted as on a rock.

"You could ask her for a loan," Matt said.

"Ask who?" Anna knew perfectly well.

"Your sister."

"Even if she had any money of her own, Elspeth wouldn't part with a ha'penny."

"Aye, but she could ask her husband. Moodie dispenses loans all the time. I'd pay him a full rate o' interest," said Matt.

"Matt, I'll not go beggin' to Elspeth."

"It's not beggin', woman. It's the transactin' o' business."

"In that case, talk to Moodie man-to-man."

"I'll not crawl to yon toad."

"But you'd have me crawl to Elspeth?"

"A different matter, a different matter."

"What way is it different?" said Anna.

"Elspeth's your sister."

"In name only. She's not my flesh an' blood."

"Don't carp," said Matt. "She's related to you, she has Jamie Moodie under her thumb, an' she'd wheedle a loan of money out of him if you asked her."

"I'll not do it, Matt."

Anna expected him to fly into a rage but he preferred to sulk. He stroked the capuchin with a gentleness which highlighted his obstinate anger. No matter how long he sulked, though, she would not ask Elspeth for money for a venture that would surely lead to ruin. Matt knew something about horses and, she assumed, about chopping down trees, but he was no farmer. He had been raised as the eldest son of an estate manager and his education had not fitted him to labour mindlessly in the dirt, to the sweat and scrimp and worry – which was the lot of all smallholders.

Since Mammy's death and Elspeth's marriage to a wealthy weaver, Anna had avoided her sister. She preferred to believe that it was Elspeth who was avoiding her and had convinced herself that Elspeth was ashamed of her impoverished relations. Compared with most folk in Balnesmoor and Ottershaw, the Sinclairs were not particularly hard-up. Compared to James Simpson Moodie, however, they were bone-gnawing paupers. James Simpson Moodie owned several lucrative properties, including the new woollen mill at Kennart and the hamlet that had sprung up around it.

It made Anna squirm to see how elegant a situation Elspeth had secured for herself. A foundling reared by a drover, Elspeth Cochran occupied the lady's life as comfortably as a cuckoo would a wagtail's nest. She had servants at her beck and call, a riding-carriage, private gardens and a house of ten apartments to hide in when she wearied of Moodie's doting attentions; all of which cast across Anna's existence a shadow of ordinariness.

Nobody in the parish would have classed either of Gaddy Cochran's daughters as 'ordinary'. Their girlhood had been marked by mystery and intrigue and both had grown into beautiful young women, so exceptional in looks that they could not avoid malicious tattle. Gaddy, then Gaddy Patterson, had first come to Balnesmoor in the company of a rough Highland drover. By sheer chance she had stumbled upon a dead girl on the moor's edge. Under the corpse was a baby, still alive. The dead girl had never been identified or her origins traced but Gaddy had laid claim to the baby, had christened her Elspeth, and had settled to live in a sheep hut leased from Sir Gilbert Bontine, the laird and landowner. If that were not queer enough, scandal had followed in the course of the years when Gaddy attracted a level-headed farmer, Coll Cochran, to her bed. Later, after Anna had been born and Coll's legal wife had died, Gaddy had married him, though that had not been enough 'recompense' for the goodfolk of Balnesmoor. When the Cochrans' home on the hill was washed out by floods, many thought that it was no more than divine retribution for a life of unpalatable wickedness. Only weeks after the disaster Gaddy followed Coll to the grave. Almost before her mother was cold in the ground, Elspeth married James Simpson Moodie and soared above the stigma, once and for all, of being naught but an orphan brat.

Anna could not make up her mind how much guile was in Elspeth, what opportunities had turned on fortune and which stemmed from calculation. No doubt her sister had become very grand but, to Anna's way of thinking, Elspeth had fulfilled her destiny while she herself still had her fate to find.

"Matt?"

Her husband lifted the sale bill and studied it as intently as Mr Eshner, the new minister, studied his Scriptures.

"Matt, will you not answer me?"

Pointedly, Matt ignored her.

Anna hesitated.

If she wished she might bring him out of his pique, take his mind off bankrupt stock and borrowings. His blood was too hot to allow him to resist if she applied her talent for seduction. In that office of marriage Matt was favoured. But making love with Matt was seldom satisfying, for he was quick and gruff and greedy. In a moment, though, he might notice the crusted pots on the hearth and decide to bully her into housework. Better to lure him from his sulk and spend the rest of the evening snug under the blankets in the back-room bed.

Stealthily Anna slipped from the stool and placed a hand on her husband's thigh. Matt flushed. It was a queer game the young Sinclairs played but Matt's desire was kindled by it.

"What's this, what's this?" he asked thickly.

"Matt, I'm fair wearied for my bed."

"Bed, is it?"

"Hmmm!"

Chittering, Jacko jumped from Matt's knee to his shoulder and bared his little teeth at the girl.

"Put him in his box," said Anna. "Quick."

Matt needed no urging. Stepping on to the chair he swung the monkey up and posted it into a wooden box with a wickerwork panel which was roped to the rafters. To the accompaniment of Jacko's angry screams and scratchings Matt stepped down again and, reaching for his wife, fondled her breasts and pressed his body against hers. She caught him by the nape of his neck and brought his mouth to her parted lips.

Farms were forgotten, ambition laid aside. Matt Sinclair burned with healthy desire. He pulled down the straps of her shift and bared her breasts. He nuzzled his mouth against them then impatiently lifted her in his arms and made towards the bedroom while Anna giggled and cried out in mock protest.

Abruptly, without warning, the cottage door flew open and Matt's father stepped into the kitchen.

Lachlan Sinclair's ankle-length greatcoat and cocked hat were pearled with rain. Now in his fiftieth year, his hair was streaked with silver and his face had filled out, relieving it of the gauntness which, a couple of decades before, had made him cadaverously handsome and had fluttered the hearts of many a lass in Ottershaw. But moral rectitude, which had not mellowed with the passage of time, had always been Sinclair's hallmark and he had never taken advantage of his attraction for the opposite sex.

"What's goin' on here?" he demanded.

His eyes blazed at this glimpse of detestable 'modern libertinism'. Outside, through the half-open door, the huge pale face of the grieve's horse peered out of the darkness and gave a feathery neigh which set Jacko ranting loudly in his cage.

Anna was the first to recover her wits.

"Matt," she hissed, "put me down."

Matt dropped her like a sack of thieved meal. Anna turned her back, laced up her bodice and pulled a shawl over her bare shoulders. She might have made a joke of it if Matt's frustration had not already boiled over into rage.

"Have you not manners enough to knock before bargin' into a man's privacy?" Matt shouted. "Is this not my home?"

Sinclair said nothing.

Deciding to pour oil on troubled waters Anna dug her husband in the ribs and enquired, "What brings you here, Mister Sinclair?"

Sinclair's indignation vanished. He removed his hat, bowed his head and solemnly announced, "The laird is dead."

"What?" said Anna, taken aback. "Old Sir Gilbert?"

"Aye, my master."

Matt relaxed. "God, but the old devil hung on long enough. How did he pop?"

Sinclair said, "He was just sittin' in his bed, eatin' supper, when he just slumped over."

Never before had Matt seen his father weep. He had assumed that the grieve's ducts were as dry as his heart. The tears nonplussed him. He glanced at Anna.

"Come, Mister Sinclair," said Anna. "Sit yourself down."

She led him to the box chair where he sat for several minutes with his long brown hand covering his face and his shoulders heaving with silent sobs.

Nudged by Anna, Matt awkwardly placed a hand on his father's back and administered a series of tentative little pats by way of consolation. In due course the sobbing dwindled and ceased.

"Aye, Mister Sinclair," said Anna, "you've been with the laird for a wheen o' years."

"Thirty years, lass."

Lachlan Sinclair was the son of the son of a grieve of Ottershaw. No mere foreman, he managed the thriving estate and had made more impression upon Ottershaw than all his ancestors put together. He had a diligent and scientific approach to farming and had been admirably backed by Sir Gilbert. Now, however, with the old laird gone, the prospect of progress was challenged, not by rebellious tenants but by the complications of family dispersal and the absence of the rightful heir, Randall. Sir Gilbert had been an easy-going fellow, content with his lot and conscientious in his duty to his tenants, a model of rustic *noblesse*. His younger son, Young Gibbie, though no fool, was too much influenced by a domineering wife while Randall, wedded to the army, had spent so little time on Ottershaw that he was an enigma to the folk there. Until Randall returned to Scotland, however, or formally renounced his claim to the lion's share of Ottershaw, there could be no forward advance.

True, barley would sprout, ewes would drop lambs, mares foal, trees fall in the plantations and bracken punch its soft green fists through untended soil; the spring calves would suckle blissfully unaware that one feeble old man had finally given up the ghost, that his sons were divided by a Continental war and that a change far removed from the axle of the seasons was about to turn over Ottershaw. Sinclair had good reason to shed tears that April night, for there was no saying what virtues might accompany old Sir Gilbert to the grave.

Anna whispered, "He's upset, Matt. Fair shocked. Give him a dram from your keg."

"What keg?"

"The whisky keg you keep in the hut."

"What do you know of kegs?"

"I'm not blind. I know it's whisky uncontaminated by a duty stamp. Never mind that now. Fetch your father a glass."

Matt grunted, left the kitchen and returned a minute or two later bearing a glass full of cloudy amber liquid which he thrust at his father. Having wiped his eyes and recovered some of his composure, Lachlan accepted the glass, sniffed it and drank a mouthful. His eyes screwed up as if he had sucked on a green lemon.

"What sort of poison is this?"

"Good honest whisky."

"Illicit whisky, I'll wager," said the grieve. "Have you been having dealings with Pad Tomelty?"

"Never heed where it came from," said Matt. "Drink an' be glad of it, Father."

Half the houses in the parish ran wet with the product of Pad Tomelty's illicit stills. It was preferred by discerning tipplers to taxed and tested distillations. The grieve had too many other things on his mind to challenge his son, however.

He drank the rest of the whisky without complaint and returned the glass to Anna. Colour returned to his cheeks and, with brusque formality, he got to his feet, extracted a letter-packet from the breast of his greatcoat and handed it to Matt.

Glancing at the writing on the wrapper, Matt noticed, to his surprise, that it was addressed to Major Randall Bontine. "What? Do you wish me t' carry it to Spain?"

"I wish you to ride to Glasgow and deliver the package into the hands of Colonel Wellman at the Cavalry Barracks in Port Eglington Street."

"Will it not do as well come daylight?"

"What if the regiments have a ship sailin' out of Port Glasgow on the morning tide?" said Sinclair. "Would you have us miss passage because you're reluctant to ride in the dark?"

The Ottershaw lawyers had been in communication with the aged Colonel Wellman as a precaution against the death of Sir Gilbert Bontine. Through Wellman's offices letters and official despatches wended out to the Peninsula for several Scots regiments who were serving there. It was an expedient route; the only route, in fact. Even so, it would be many weeks before Randall received news of his father's passing and signed his name to the documents that the package contained. The documents, when returned, would give Young Gilbert the power to act for the family and might, if Randall were so disposed, relinquish claim to the properties in exchange for a financial settlement.

"Take Sabre," said Sinclair.

"Master Randall's own stallion?"

"It's the fastest horse in the stable."

During his salad days as a stable lad the bloodstock stallion had been Matt's special charge and only he had ever established rapport with the big, skittish horse. Sabre would be sure to impress the cavalry officers at Port Eglinton Street with the fact that Ottershaw was no tuppenny sty and that the Bontines were quality folk.

"Am I to go alone?"

"You are. But hurry, Matthew, I beg you."

Anna had already gone into the back room to find Matt's riding breeks and his good black coat. It would be a wet and dirty ride and he would arrive dishevelled but at least he would start off looking smart.

It would hardly matter, of course, what he looked like, for the decrepit officers who staffed the Glasgow barracks would not take notice of a servant, even if he were riding a fine thoroughbred stallion. Their minds would be fixed on the faraway war in Spain. By comparison Bontine business would seem trivial and the letter would be consigned to an ordinary mail coach or a slow vessel out of Leith. Eventually, though, it might find its way to Randall Bontine who, Anna imagined, might very well read it with a shrug of indifference and go on to light his cigar with the document, leaving Gibbie to fret and fume for months or even years.

While Matt shaved and dressed, Anna stayed in the back room. She listened, head cocked, to the purl of male voices. It was the first time she had heard father and son communicate close and confidential. Perhaps there was hope for Matt's future yet. Perhaps Sinclair would soften and restore him to a rung of the ladder that would lead one day to Matt becoming the grieve of Ottershaw.

"Anna."

The girl rose from the side of the bed and at once went into the kitchen.

Matt looked well enough in the rig. He held his head haughtily and kissed her, without urging, upon the cheek. It was as if the damned great lump imagined that *he* was going to fight the French and find glory under the guns. She managed not to smile, though, as Matt solemnly shook his father's hand and, with the letter-packet safe in his jacket, strode out of the door and unhitched the horse that his father had ridden from the stables. Sabre would be saddled and waiting in the stable yard, champing in annoyance at having his night's rest disturbed. The grieve and the girl listened to the sounds of the horse fade into quiet, rain-hissing darkness. Even Jacko seemed caught in the hiatus, paws clenched to the wickerwork, face screwed up in enquiry.

Anna cleared her throat. "Would you care for another dram, Mister Sinclair?"

Although he had given her permission to do so, Anna could not bring herself to call him Father.

Sinclair shook his head. "Why do you burn such a wasteful fire?"

"To keep the monkey warm."

"Aye, him and his precious monk." Sinclair shook his head once more; his son's habits were quite beyond fathom. "Are you with child yet?"

"Nature'll decide when it's time for me to bear, Mister Sinclair." Out of devilment, Anna added, "It's no' for want of tryin', be assured."

Sinclair grunted and reached his hat from the table, his thoughts turning to pressing events at the mansion. Though funeral arrangements would be decided upon by Young Gibbie, Sinclair would be required to execute them. Certainly he would have to gather the servants and estate workers and inform them, officially, that the laird was dead. Word would be half-way to Stirling by now, of course, since news of that magnitude spread like wildfire.

Anna opened the door for her father-in-law then put a hand on his sleeve.

"Mister Sinclair?"

"Aye, lass?"

"Will he come home?"

"He'll be home tomorrow forenoon."

"I meant Mister Randall."

Sinclair hesitated. "He might. Aye, he might."

"I hope he does," said Anna.

The fact that she had an opinion at all surprised the grieve. "Why so?"

"He'll be a better master than Gibbie."

"You'd do well to remember that Mister Gilbert may be our new laird and learn to speak of him with more respect."

"Equally, though, Mister Randall might be our new laird," Anna insisted.

"It'll hardly matter in the dairy," said Sinclair. "The hands'll be treated fairly by either one since they're both Bontines an' their father's sons."

Sinclair pulled open the door. The conversation had made him faintly uneasy. Air flicked at his hair and flapped the skirts of his greatcoat. He turned and bade his daughter-in-law a curt good night. Sensibly Anna asked no more questions, but shivering a little, stood at the cottage door and watched the erect figure of the grieve merge into the trees. She closed the door and turned against it.

Letting the shawl slip from her shoulders, she permitted a broad grin to stretch her lips and, thrusting herself forward, performed an impromptu little jig around the kitchen table. Jacko scowled disapprovingly from above. The passing of the old laird affected Anna not one jot, except inasmuch as it might persuade Randall to return to Ottershaw and take possession of its policies and all the folk who dwelled thereon; herself, of course, included.

Several years ago, when she was little more than a child, she had kissed the handsome soldier. The memory of that evening had never been far from Anna's thoughts. She wondered if Randall Bontine remembered it too. Remembered her. Fancifully, she imagined he might think of her and weigh her a bit in the balance when he came to make his decision.

Suddenly the capuchin screamed, eyes glittering with inexplicable malevolence. The din made Anna start and immediately abandon her dance. Hands on hips she scowled up at the monkey in its box. She considered releasing it, for that was what Matt would want her to do, then changed her mind. Picking the lamp from the table she swept through to bed, leaving the litter in the kitchen untouched and Matt's pet to swelter in his cage in the rafters. With the door firmly closed Jacko's chatter would not disturb her unduly, not tonight when, at peace, she might uninhibitedly dream of a soldier lover and Randall Bontine's return to Ottershaw.

For many a gallant Highlander the night march to Almarez would be the last duty he would perform in the service of King George. Half the regiment would be dead before daylight. The lads carried that knowledge with them like extra bags of shot. They had been buoyed up by the recent capture of Cuidad Rodrigo and the surrender of Badajoz but their enthusiasm for the latest campaign waned as they trudged along the paths that the Spanish guides had picked out across the pitch-black mountains of the Lina.

Plans had already been evolved and finalised. Backed by a battalion of Portuguese caçadores, General Chowne's 'slashers' would storm the castle of Miravete which towered over the pass and protected the road to Madrid. General

Long's column would tackle the French garrison's war-works beyond the summit where stout gates and palisades bristled with muskets and cannon.

Composed mainly of Gordons and Highland Light Infantry, General Howard's brigade had been given the task of taking the French forts of Ragusa and Napoleon which defended the line of the river in front of the little town

Sir Rowland Hill accompanied the Scots, riding with Howard at the head of the straggling column. Not far behind the commanders and their aides rode two seasoned officers, Iain Stuart and Randall Bontine. They were both of the rank of major and rivals for the honour of leading the dawn attack upon Fort Napoleon. The great attraction for the officers was the fact that the battle would surely become that most desperate and glorious of all military enterprises – a forlorn hope.

Bontine's application had been first into the general's hand but the charge would probably be given to Stuart who was favoured for his bluffness and blunt manner. Besides, Bontine was still regarded as an interloper, a Hussar, though he had served as liaison to the Highlanders for twenty arduous months. It would be Stuart who would wag the claymore at the head of the storming party, Bontine was a name that trailed no legends outside a wee patch of farmland west of Stirling, whereas Iain Stuart belonged to that race of kings and tinkers worshipped by the Gaels, and owned a castle in misty Kintail.

Bontine's value to the Scotch brigades lay not in the speed of his sabre but in the quickness of his tongue. He spoke fluent French and Portuguese and was versed in the ninety-nine variants of Spanish, from the red-rough jabber of sierra guerrillas to the soft sallow dialects of the Andalusian plain's folk. He could converse with priests in a Latin as formal as a cardinal's and could address nuns with a charm that was utterly at odds with his appearance, having features which might have been shaped by Satan to tempt novices from their vows With tunic top discarded, shirt unlaced, Major Bontine looked more Spanish than Pedro Gomez, the matador turned desperado.

In contrast, Stuart cultivated a granite-like smoothness, all shaven and polished. He showed no scars to the world whereas

Bontine had scars in plenty, including one that quirked the corner of his lip into a wry smile. High cheekbones, a complexion the colour of walnut wood and hair worn curled in a style that the Highlanders abdured set the Hussar apart from his fellow officers. He did not much care for their manners and did not encourage friendships, except when out-piquet duty was on offer or there was a charge to be led, for Randall Bontine loved not just the heat of combat but the proximity of death and longed for the opportunity to rub close to death's pale garment time and again.

In Egypt and during the bloody months of struggle in the Peninsula, fate had dealt generously with Bontine's queer appetite for danger. As he guided his mare down the stumbling path between the woods of Truxillo and the river Tagus, with cassions and tumbrils rattling and groaning in the dark around him, Randall Bontine felt a little on edge, eager to be once more engaged with the oldest enemy of all. Somehow, though, he must attach himself officially to the storming party and be in the vanguard of the action. It was there that real glory might be found, that he might test his courage to its limit. He glanced slyly at the passionless Major Stuart riding flank to flank with him and turned over in his brain how he might persuade the fellow to let him take the claymore.

Almarez was hardly an inspiring location for brave deeds. The town was merely a handful of hovels backed on to an ancient stone bridge which had been ruined by bombardment. Some way downstream, the French had constructed a pontoon to link their forts. The first fort, Napoleon, was exceedingly well-entrenched and protected by heavy cannon and about three hundred troops. Sir Rowland Hill had explained to the officers that a surprise attack would be impossible. Chowne's 'slashers' would have to charge the garrison at Miravete first where the Frenchies would ignite signal rockets and tar-barrels to alert the river forts and bring them immediately to arms.

At length the Highlanders, weary and bruised, emerged from the foothills on to the flat pastures which spread to the river. Hardly had the last Gordon set foot upon level ground before the sky across the hill turned livid with flashes and flares as musket and cannon shot reverberated down the valley. The assault on Miravete had begun.

A flock of goats, which miraculously had escaped French foraging parties, came bleating down the sward. Confronted by a priest and a couple of English generals, the animals unhesitatingly flung themselves into the river only to be tugged out of sight by coiling currents. Encumbered by weapons, hammers, levers and scaling-ladders, the soldiers sought to separate themselves and reform in some sort of order some little distance from the bank of the Tagus. Once in formation they would be given a few minutes' stand-down before being marshalled for the dawn attack. Randall Bontine stuck close to Major Stuart. He also tried to keep Sergeant McIver in sight while he fought the restlessness which the confusion roused in his wiry and unreliable mare. Fifty or sixty yards away, on the summit of a low hill, the staff officers' tent was being erected, giving centre to the bedlam. It would be a matter of ten minutes or a quarter of an hour before Stuart and he would be called to the general's table and the charge finally allocated.

Bontine slid from the saddle and calmly unpacked his breakfast. Stuart dismounted also. He watched the Hussar unroll a spotted kerchief and take from it a fist of beef, roasted black but appetising enough for a soldier after a hard night's march. Bontine tore off a bite and, without a word, offered the fist to the Highlander. Stuart shook his head, determined to go into battle on an empty belly, as the *Manual of Arms* advised, lest he was gut shot and the ball had to be extracted by surgeon's forceps. Bontine grinned and tore another mouthful from the meat. He also had a wine-bag full of dry Jerez. He offered it too to Stuart and was again refused.

"Och, aye, Major," said Bontine, laying on the accent thick, "it'll be a braw sort o' mornin' for a fecht, I'm thinkin'."

"That it will, sir," Iain Stuart answered.

Expertly Bontine sucked from the teat of the wine-bag and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. Stuart turned. His valet was waiting to be given instruction but Stuart waved him away. There was nothing, at this moment, for the majors to do. To assist in the work of the brigadiers would have been unseemly and they dared not intrude, until summoned, upon the deliberations of the generals. In formation soldiers lay about on the ground among a welter of equipment. To get away from the Hussar more than anything, Stuart picked clear of the sprawl and guided his horse to a sprig of the river to allow it to drink. With the wine-bag slung across his shoulder and a cheroot stuck in his mouth, Bontine, tormentingly, followed.

Across the river the vineyards and orange trees of Almarez seemed to be asleep. The abutments of the old bridge were visible against a lightening sky. Some distance downstream the sluggish current slapped and rippled against the floats of the French pontoon. Now that they were able to survey the terrain at first hand, both Stuart and Bontine saw how painfully exposed the storming party would be as it made its run on Fort Napoleon. Side-by-side, while the horses dipped to drink, Highlander and Lowlander stared at the scene that softly emerged from the May morning mist.

"It is," murmured Stuart, "ominously still, is it not, Bontine?"

"It'll be frantic enough below the trench walls if I know the Frenchies."

"If, sir, it was given to you to lead the storming party," said Stuart, "how would you approach the task?"

"It will not be my party, Stuart."

"Perhaps not; but how?"

Bontine pointed his cheroot to the right. "To gain a few precious yards of cover I would approach from the line of scrub. The German rifles would then be able to fire over the heads of our column as it pressed upon the *tête-du-pont*. The leader of the storming party must ensure that the earth ramps are surmounted and the French guns stilled before the main attack begins or there will be a fearful slaughter. It is the only possible approach.'

'I agree, Bontine."

The officers glanced behind them as fresh explosions rocked Miravete and flames shot, angry and profound into the sullen cloud which quilted the sierra.

"Powder kegs," said Stuart.

The officers were silent, thinking of soldiers caught by the blast, of the hellish agony of black powder burns.

Stuart cleared his throat. "Go on, Bontine."

"One must have a taste for simplicity, Major, to derive enjoyment from this prospect. God, a weasel could find no shelter on the sward between the trees and the rampart," said Bontine.

"How would you tackle it?" Stuart said. "If you had command."

"I would tackle it – as you will, no doubt – with a cry in my throat and my sword in my fist and the lads hugging my rump. I'd be first up the first ladder and would not turn my face from the front no matter how heavy the odds."

"Fine words for a Cavalry officer."

"I had no horse under me at the battle of Albuera; only rocks and dirt like every other Scot who fought there!"

"Were you not afraid?" said Stuart.

"No, Stuart, I was not afraid."

"Then you have no humanity, sir."

"That – sir – may very well be true."

"Or you are a teller of lies."

"If that's your opinion, Major, why do you not put me to the test? You will be given charge of the storming party, of that there's no doubt, but do you not appoint your own supernumerary?"

"What if I do?"

"Appoint me."

"So that's what you require, is it? To be my first officer?"

"It is."

"A desperate honour, Bontine."

"To be first over the wall of Napoleon will be honour enough for me."

"Aye, but will the clansmen follow you?" said Stuart.

"If you give them the chance they will follow even a Hussar when the fighting's fierce enough and their blood is roused."

From the assembly ground came the shouts of sergeants and the snapping voices of haughty young subalterns from the kennel by the generals' tent. In the bleary light it seemed that the field was sprouting soldiers like dragon's teeth.

"Come, Stuart, grant me the favour," said Randall Bontine urgently. "What harm can it do? I am, after all, a major too. Would you have a mere captain dogging your footsteps into the *Gazette*?" Bontine bit his lip. "Please, Stuart."

It appealed to Stuart's vanity to hear Bontine plead. He had not, in fact, considered whom he would invite to support him. He had no particular officer in mind for the appointment.

"Major Stuart tae the general's table," cried a voice from the field. "Assemble for attack, sur, in five minutes. Major Stuart, sur, dae I have your ear?"

"Aye, I hear you, Sergeant," Stuart replied.

The Highlander drew his horse from the shallows, petted its muzzle and walked it away, side-by-side with Bontine and the mare. The tops of the mountains were clear against the milky sky to the east while the hovels of Almarez had emerged from the night. It would have been a scene of utmost rural tranquillity, except for the clank of war machines and the boom of cannon from the heights. Stuart paused. Bontine and he were boxed by the flanks of their mounts, brought into intimacy by the sleek, wet shoulders.

Stuart said, "It is at this hour that my thoughts turn to my homeland and my heart yearns for Kintail. Would that I could smell the heather on the fens and hear the lowin' of my fine cattle on the slopes of Elchaig."

Bontine had no stomach for such moist sentimentality. Elchaig, he suspected, would be a midden of rain-soaked peat and skittering scree, possessed of beauty for the six or eight days in the year when the sun managed to penetrate the mirk.

Stuart went on, "Would that I might spend but a moment now on the bonnie shore of Loch Alsh with my dear father at my side; then I could die content!"

Randall Bontine seldom squandered a thought for Ottershaw or the parish of Balnesmoor, hide-bound and petty, or for his feeble old father who had nothing on his brain but sheep, sheep, sheep. He gave a sigh, though, to indicate to Stuart that in spite of his flamboyance he was a lugubrious Scot at heart.

"Aye, Stuart, but we have chosen to be soldiers and must fight nobly. To die well in battle is the fate my own dear father would wish for me."

"You speak the truth, Bontine." Stuart wiped his shiny face with a granite hand. "You may have charge of the second rank of the storming party if that is your wish."

"It is my dearest wish."

"The appointment is yours," said Stuart.

"You have my gratitude, sir," said Randall Bontine, who had no intention of dying for anyone or anything, least of all for a parboiled notion of nobility.

Stuart offered his hand in manly amnesty. "Good luck to you, Bontine."

"God be with you, Stuart," Randall Bontine answered and, having gained his ends, stuck the cheroot back in his mouth and led the mare to tether without wasting another word on the pompous idiot from Kintail.

That part of Balnesmoor which lay east of the village was known as the Orrals, a name whose origin was lost in lore and legend. Sprawling between the enclosures of the Strath and the summits of the Campsie Fells, it was unfettered, uncouth country owned in part by the Bontines, though no posts marked the portion and it featured only nominally in valuations of the estate. Few local people ever set foot upon its acreage. Its grazing was callow and cattle there put to cud had the habit of dying without visible cause, giving rise to the rumour that the place was cursed.

Elspeth's childhood had been spent only a mile from the edge of the Orrals, under the shadow of the hill of Drumglass. But she did not know the eastern tract at all, though she had often walked its bordering road, holding Anna's hand, on the way to school in Balfron and had looked often enough upon its rough, uninviting acres from the hind side of Dyers' Dyke in the days when the Cochrans had tenancy of the farm. But residence in Moss House as the wife of James Moodie had altered her perspectives and the Orrals, lying just behind the house, had become a refuge from gentility.

Perhaps the wild moorland reminded her of her girlhood on the Nettleburn. Perhaps it offered contrast to the solid satinwood elegance of Moss House. Perhaps it sheltered her from knowledge of the proximity of Kennart where her husband's looms whacked out a fortune in wool goods and the mill-workers' rows were full of babble as if the men had taken on the faults of the jennies and scribbling machines to add to their human failings.

By stepping over the stile tucked at the rear of formal gardens, only a half-mile from the bustling backs of Main Street, Elspeth could be as cut off from Balnesmoor as if she had been whisked to a virgin continent. She would remove her slippers and stockings and hide them in a bush. She would tie up her skirts with a cloth belt and bare-legged and barefoot like a fisher lassie would wade into the bracken and cross to the little glen where the burn dropped down from the hill.

It might well be that James knew where she spent her afternoons, though even her husband would hardly have a spy on the Orrals. No tyrant at home, James was aware of how much she detested Kennart. He did not insist that she visited the new community or interest herself charitably in the lives of his workers. Kennart was so changed from the days when the bridge spanned a calm, brown pool, and the village lads, Matt Sinclair among them, came down to bathe on warm summer evenings. Whether James did or did not know about her fondness for the Orrals, Elspeth pretended that it was her secret place. Cautiously she avoided showing herself on the ridge which was overtopped by Dyers' Dyke. The Cochrans' farm was now occupied by a shepherding family, employees of James, and if they saw her they might take word back to the master. She kept to the glen, a great sag in the contour, well coated and lush, where, below the line to which grouse laid claim, pheasants, horned in emerald, strutted in a stand of rye grass.

In fighting fig, the cocks were eager to attract as many hens as their territory would bear. Elspeth had watched the preliminary mating dances and could identify individual specimens, even among the dowdy brown females. In a frayed quarto volume from James's library, she had read that the laying season for pheasants stretched into June. But as a rule there was little enough science in the young woman's observations. She was no recorder, no list-maker, nor did she delve into the new sort of literature which sought to explain everything by rigid reasoning and evidence of fact.

The sky that May day was fresh, with scuts of white cloud moving against a bolt of pale blue and in the glen the sun beat down so warmly that Elspeth discarded her wrap. She sat cross-legged in the lee of a rock watching the cock pheasants confront each other.

The man was stationed, not thirty yards from her, across the neck of the glen. For a moment after she detected his presence she thought that it might be Matt, her brother-in-law, then, heart thudding, she realised that he was a stranger. He smiled and raised a finger to his lips.

Elspeth would not be stilled. She instantly rose and unhitched her skirts to hide her bare legs.

"Wait," the stranger called. "I intend you no harm."

"Who are you, pray?"

"I am called Michael Blaven."

"What do you do here?"

"I might ask the same question of you."

Elspeth's instincts urged her to scramble up the slope and run through the bracken to the safety of James's garden; yet she sensed no malice in the man, and lingered, intrigued. Besides, the width of the glen still separated them.

"I'm Mistress Moodie. I live just there, on the Harlwood Road," she announced, like a warning.

"Are you, by chance, wife to James Moodie?"

"I am."

"I have heard of you."

"Have you, indeed?" said Elspeth crisply. "Now, sir, you have told me your name but not the nature of your business on the Orrals."

"I've come here to gather plants for my aunt. Perhaps you know her? Janet Blaven of Preaching Friar."

Elspeth relaxed her guard. Miss Blaven was a dabbler in green medicine, sufficiently independent and well-to-do to rouse no hostility even in those Philistines who scorned spinster healers and thought them to be agents of the devil. Miss Blaven's thatched cottage, which bore the odd name of Preaching Friar, lay in a dell beyond the Harlwood print-fields. James had once pointed it out to Elspeth as they rode back from dinner with Mr Rudge.

"I know of your aunt," Elspeth admitted. "But we have not met."

"May I extricate myself from this bush and come round to talk with you?"

"Talk of what, sir?"

"To exchange pleasantries, without unseemly bawling."

Elspeth nodded. "If you wish."

She took herself to the top of the slope and glanced anxiously towards Moss House. She could just make out the tops of the trees at the garden's end. She was nervous of meeting the strange young man though he was no tinker or footpad but a relative of a woman of excellent reputation. Unless, Elspeth thought, he is lying, but it was too late to retreat. She stood her ground as he made round by the neck of the glen, stepped over the burn and waded through the heather to join her.

Michael Blaven wore an open-throated shirt and cutaway coat of burled tweed. His cuffs were turned up and fastened neatly with twine. Around his shoulder was a leather game-bag. Like Elspeth he was bare-legged and barefoot. His hair was dark brown and soft and his skin pale, except for a spot of colour on each cheek. As if to establish his *bona fides*, he immediately opened the game-bag and produced a linen pouch which he held out to her.

"Dandelion root," he said. "According to my aunt, best taken when spring sap rises in the stem."

Cautiously Elspeth sniffed the little sack. She did not know what dandelion root smelled like, but the odour was faint and she was willing to take the stranger on trust. He popped the pouch back into the bag, gave her a bow and offered his hand. In town society the gesture would have been considered a flagrant breach of etiquette and Elspeth would have been obliged to treat the gentleman coldly. But the Orrals was far removed from Edinburgh's salons and she gave him her hand without hesitation.

"Madam," he said. "It is an honour."

He held her fingers lightly for a moment and did not smarm over them with his lips, a custom which Elspeth deplored. It surprised Elspeth how appealing she found the stranger's attentions. She was used to brittle, insincere flattery, to the application of cold charm, the coin of many of James's associates. Mr Blaven, however, was friendly without being forward. Even so, Elspeth could find nothing to say to him. She had no common ground with the gentleman. She could not enquire about the state of crops or the prices of wool or the speed of the new coach to York. She knew nothing at all about Michael except that he was related to Janet Blaven and collected dandelion roots.

As if appreciating her difficulty, Michael said, "Pheasants never cease to give me amusement. They remind me of Glasgow dowagers."

Elspeth seized the lead. "Are you from Glasgow, then?"

"I am currently residing in Harlwood with my aunt."

She could not be sure whether or not he had intentionally evaded her question. "Are you a cuckoo or a bird of passage?"

"I'm a sparrow in the attic," said Michael. "Just a simple town lad lost in the confusions of the countryside."

"But you're not ill-versed in country matters," said Elspeth. "At least you can tell a pheasant from a peacock."

"And a hawk from a handsaw."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's a line from a play."

"I've never been to a play," said Elspeth.

"Well, you've missed little," said Michael. "Theatres are stuffy, vulgar places."

Elspeth said, "Are you an apothecary?"

"Lord, no!"

"But you do assist your aunt?"

"Perhaps I should become an apothecary, a pupil of Aunt Janet. In fact, I'm without a profession. I have abandoned all ambition to forge ahead in the world and have settled for the ife of a recluse."

"Have you no family, apart from your aunt?"

"I've no wife and no children." He dismissed the question airily. "What of you?"

"What of me?"

"I am, I confess, surprised to find the wife of James Moodie alone on the Orrals in the middle of the afternoon."

"I'm not kept under lock and key, Mister Blaven!"

"I did not mean to suggest it. But are there no tea-drinkings, no calls for you to make as part of your duties as a wife?"

"Not today," said Elspeth.

"I am glad of it."

"Are you? I'm puzzled as to why it should make you glad or sorry how I spend my afternoons."

"If you had had a tea engagement, Mistress Moodie, I should not, in all likelihood, have met you."

"I think, Mister Blaven, I must return home now."

"I didn't intend to be forward."

"It's not that," said Elspeth. "It's simply – simply time for me to go home."

"May I walk with you to your gate?"

Quickly Elspeth said, "No. I prefer to go alone."

Michael gave a gentle shrug of understanding. "In that case, with permission, I'll go back to grubbing along the burn bank for more wild Taraxacum."

"Is your bag not near full?"

"No, alas. My aunt requires vast quantities of spring root. Dried and powdered it constitutes a wonderful specific for disorders of the liver and kidney."

"My mother used to take it from time to time, for purifying her blood," said Elspeth.

"I'll ask my aunt to deliver some to your mother, if I may."

"My mother died these two years since."

"Ah!" Michael paused respectfully. "Do you have children, Mistress Moodie?"

"No, I have no children," said Elspeth. "Now, I must go."

"Perhaps we'll encounter each other again."

"I fear not, Mister Blaven. I seldom come to walk on the Orrals. My 'duties' keep me o'er busy."

"That's unfortunate,' said Michael. "I've enjoyed our conversation very much."

"Good afternoon to you, Mister Blaven."

"Good afternoon, Mistress Moodie."

Swiftly she turned and walked along the indistinct path that would carry her to the shoulder from which she might see not just the tree-tops but, solid and safe, the chimney-heads of Moss House. Although she did not pause to glance behind, she sensed that Michael was standing at the edge of the glen watching her, watching over her until the hunch of the moor put her finally out of sight.

Four girls knelt on the floor. Two were dairy-maids from Ottershaw. The second pair were sisters from the hamlet of Eardmore which lay three or four miles into the hills.

"Go on then, Anna, will ye ask her for a readin'?" said Brigit Tomelty. "I haven't got all day t' loiter here."

Shafts of sunlight penetrated the broken roof of the ruined hut in the bramble thicket and dappled the earth floor with shadow. A candle flickered, smoke rather than light adding to the atmosphere of conspiracy. The sisters, Wynn and Marian Sylas, had brought the red-wax candle stump along with other paraphernalia.

Anna said, "First tell me if he's still alive."

Brigit Tomelty said, "Ye'll need t' give him a proper name. It'll not work wi'out a proper name."

Anna drew in a deep breath. She was reluctant to reveal her secret but had no alternative. She caught Brigit's arm. "On pain o' death, tell nobody outside this place."

"Nah, nah! You can trust me, Anna."

"Well," Anna took the plunge, "his name's Randall Bontine."

"Bontine!" Brigit let out a wicked chuckle. "Damn me, you have gall, Mistress Sinclair, so ye have."

In a dead, flat sort of tone Marian, the dummy's sister, said, "Haud yer tongue, Brigit."

"Is Master Randall Bontine o' Ottershaw still in the land o' the livin'?" Anna solemnly enquired.

The girls fell silent. Even Brigit Tomelty's eyes grew round as Wynn Sylas's head began to thrash about on the cabbage-stalk neck. The dummy wore a bright print-cotton dress, sizes too large for her. About her throat were strings of carved wooden beads which clucked and chuckled as her head rolled.

"Is she havin' a fit?" murmured Brigit.

"Let her do her wark," said her sister.

It was weird work, indeed, for half a crown. Anna regretted having ventured into this game which the sisters from Eardmore had transformed into something more serious and possibly dangerous. She could not withdraw from it now, however, not without insulting Brigit who had arranged the meeting.

Brigit Tomelty was one of the many children of Pad Tomelty, the whisky smuggler, and nobody could understand why Sinclair had ever agreed to give her work on Ottershaw, unless Sinclair too had been intimidated by her evil eye. But Brigit was gentle with cattle, could coax an extra quart out of the slackest teat and was also punctual at the milking stool, which was more than could be said for some lassies. Brigit was also possessed of all sorts of arcane knowledge, quite beyond the ken of the simple village girls, who held her in awe. The 'new' generation might be godless but the sinews of superstition were strong in them. Besides, they loved inducing 'the shivers' and discovered in Brigit a brashness that was easy to confuse with evil. Not knowing quite what she wanted or expected, Anna had approached Brigit about three weeks after old Sir Gilbert had been put into his grave in the Balnesmoor kirkyard. The affair had been disappointingly dull and, like Matt's ride to Glasgow, had promised more diversion than it delivered. Brigit was quick to sniff mischief in Anna's tentative request and relieved Sinclair's young wife of a shilling in exchange for arranging a full-blown 'reading'.

Anna did not know what a 'reading' entailed. She thought it would be cards or hazel sticks. She had not expected it to be done by Wynn, the deaf-and-dumb lass from Eardmore, who was reputed to speak the truth; or rather to record the truth upon her scratched school slate. The mute's prophetic gifts were scorned by cynics who pointed out that her sister Marian was the biggest gossip in the county and that Wynn's amazing predictions were vague things open to all sorts of interpretations. Whatever the truth might be, Brigit Tomelty professed a belief in the dummy's powers and that was recommendation enough for Anna.

Eyes half closed, lashes flickering, Wynn mouthed the name, "*Randall Bontine*", without uttering a sound.

Anna could see the stunned tongue taking a big lick out of the words. The dummy's hand rose. In it, held like a dagger, was a wedge of cloth-cutter's chalk. On the dummy's lap, leaning against her breast, Marian placed the old school slate. The hand slashed at the slate. Letters appeared with incredible rapidity.

LIVE

"He's alive," said Brigit. "We've learned that much."

"Where is he?" Anna asked.

It was impossible to make sense of the writhings of Wynn's tongue but the word fisted on to the blackened board was clear enough.

SPAN

"Spain," said Brigit. "Is that no' right, Anna?"

"I'm askin' *her*, Brigit, an' payin' sweet for *her* answers."

Anna was uneasy, feeling that she might be the victim of an elaborate fraud. So far, she had been given nothing but the word *Spain*, which anybody in the county could have surmised since Randall Bontine was a soldier.

Wynn's mouth was a crinkled line, head cocked to one side as if she were puzzled by the images that floated behind her lids. Letters flicked off the chalk in what seemed to be an illiterate jumble which only became readable after the hand had lifted away.

FLAG SORD SUN WATER SMOK DETH

Anna sat bolt upright.

"Death?"

"It's a battle," said Brigit; Marian nodded agreement. "Randall Bontine's fightin' a bloody battle."

Wynn glanced, puzzled, at her sister and shook her head.

"That's all she can see," Marian announced.

"A wee bit of a battle," said Anna, "is not enough for half a crown. I could've predicted it m'self without leavin' the kitchen."

Brigit Tomelty tended to agree that an element of deception had been put upon them. "Come on, Marian, get her t' dole out a drop more, eh?"

No signs or signals passed between the sisters and Anna wondered if the dummy was not truly mute or if she had learned to read from the lips by careful study.

"More, Wynn, eh?" Brigit cajoled.

Resolutely the deaf-and-dumb girl shook her head.

"It's a damned cheat," Anna declared.

Wynn was staring at her, her gaze even more disconcerting than the Reverend Eshner's pink-rimmed stare. It seemed to penetrate right to the truth in Anna's heart.

Wynn groped behind her and produced a book, a Holy Bible.

Flat and thin, Marian smiled. "Wynn says she'll make a bindin' for you, Anna Sinclair, since you're not satisfied wi' her readin'."

"A bindin'? I hope it's better value than a readin'."

"Aye, far better value," Marian Sylas promised. "Wynn likes fine t' do bindin' spells."

"Get on wi' it, then," said Brigit.

The dummy handed the Bible to Marian. It was a perfectly ordinary volume with a grained cloth cover, an edition distributed to young people when they became fledged members of the Kirk. But the unexpected appearance of the Holy Book at such a convention disturbed Anna considerably. It raised in her a terrible dread, as if the power of the mute from the hills had been put above suspicion. Within the Bible was a long, iron door-key, head and handle projecting from the

Book's ends. Marian Sylas opened the Book at the place marked by the door-key and beckoned Anna to come closer.

Anna, on her knees, shifted reluctantly.

"Here." Marian placed her fingernail on a verse in the Book of Ruth. "Read this part aloud an' try to remember it."

"What for?"

"Read on 'til I tell ye to stop."

"I'm not readin' –"

"The words will bind you to your loved one," said Marian

"Maybe the spell'll no' work on a laird," Brigit suggested.

"This spell is powerful enough to work on anybody," said Marian. "You, Brigit Tomelty, take the handle o' the key an' place it on the tips o' your fingers."

"Me? What for are ye needin' my assistance?"

"You're a neutral pole," Marian answered.

"No. I –"

"Do it, Brigit," said Anna.

The handle of the key was placed gingerly on Brigit's fingertips, the head of the key rested on Anna's, the Bible held open where she could see it.

"Now," said Marian, "read an' remember."

Anna read, "*Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people: where thou diest* –" Anna hesitated, lifted her gaze to Wynn who smiled reassuringly; she continued, "*thou diest, will I die and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.*"

"Can ye remember it?"

"Aye, I'll try."

Carefully Marian Sylas placed the Bible over the key and closed it. She bound it with two grey cotton tapes and adjusted it into balance again on the girls' fingertips. With new fervour Wynn wriggled forward on her bottom and touched the upper cover of the Bible with a gesture as light as thistledown. By now Anna was desperately afraid. In seeking the service of the mute from Eardmore she had not imagined that, before the afternoon was over, she would be calling on the power of the Lord to invoke love in Randall Bontine, if love it was.

The Holy Book was quite horizontal.

Marian Sylas said, "You're the enquirer, Anna Sinclair."

"What . . . what do I do?"

"Entreat awa'."

She had paid a tidy sum of money for 'contact' with Randall Bontine. She had longed with all her heart for the laird's soldier son to remember her with the same pervasive force as she recalled him. But she had not, until that moment, ever believed that he would. A sensible part of her character knew that the likes of Randall Bontine had kissed, and God knows what else, hundreds of girls and that he would hardly be likely to recall an incident on the banks of the Lightwater all those months ago. Now, however, that sensible core was silenced by the precision of the ceremony.

"Entreat," Marian ordered.

Anna began hesitantly but found that the verses slid from her tongue as if she had rehearsed them for days.

"*. . . will I die and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.*"

"Again," said Marian.

"But why?"

"It hasn't taken yet."

"*Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest –*"

The Bible tilted suddenly on the key. It hung from its spine for an instant then clapped down to the floor, plucking the iron key from the girls' fingers. Brigit cried out and snatched her hand away as if it had been burned. She scowled at Wynn, but the dummy had exerted no pressure at all and only the natural little pulses in the girls' fingers had disturbed the Book's balance. Not Brigit, who had no more religion than a doorpost, and certainly not Anna, would have accepted such a rational explanation at that moment. To the Ottershaw lassies a deep old magic had clinched the spell.

Anna's upper lip was dewed with perspiration. She felt exhausted, as if she had sent her spirit in pursuit of Randall Bontine and the chase had been long and arduous.

"I'll . . . I'll need to be makin' awa' now," stammered Brigit, who had been shaken by a ceremony which she had not witnessed before and which lay outwith the range of vices to which she normally subscribed. "Are ye comin', Anna?"

"Go, then," said Marian. "Wynn can do no more for ye. It's all set an' dyed into the cloth. Indelible."

Huskily Anna said, "I give ye both thanks."

Wynn sat like a great raggy doll, legs stuck out, head cocked, a tiny crease of satisfaction on her lips. Slate and chalk lay by her thigh, Bible and key on the ground between her feet. It was the last image that Anna had of the mute from Eardmore for, with Brigit tugging at her hand, she got to her feet and quickly left the bramble hut, hurrying away down the overgrown path towards the cow pasture. Wynn, smiling still, watched the dairy-maids depart.

Touching Wynn's soft, unhealthy cheeks with her fingers, peering eagerly into the colourless eyes, Marian knelt by her sister's side.

"You saw somethin' else, did ye not?" she whispered. "Tell me, lovey, tell me what else you saw."

The dummy giggled and, lifting the slate once more, chalked one word upon it: BLOOD.

When the regimental colours were broken to the wind the storming party rose from hiding in the scrub and raised the scaling-ladders to point at the walls of Fort Napoleon.

"God keep you, Bontine," Stuart said.

"Safe through the day, Stuart," growled Randall.

Stuart hoisted his arm. The old basket-guard claymore glinted in the first rays of the morning sun.

"Now, my gallant laddies," he roared. *"Charge on to victory."*

Randall had shed his heavy riding boots in favour of soft leather sandals. He had wrapped his throat with a red bandana and had knotted a silk kerchief about his brow to keep sweat from trickling into his eyes. Crossed about his chest were two sheathed bayonets and a holstered pistol. If Stuart disapproved of the informal trim he gave no sign. In any case it hardly mattered what opinion Iain Stuart had of the half-mad Lowlander for neither man was likely to survive the charge.

From the line of the breastworks came a stutter of musketry. Garlands of fire showed up the caps of the French grenadiers.

"Vive l'Empereur." Randall, half-way across the open ground, heard the hoarse French voices from the angle of the epaule. *"Cannoniers, commencez. Commencez le feu."*

The roar of nine twenty-four-pounders shook the river bed. Grape and canister swept like iron rain over the storming party and carried half the Scots into oblivion.

Weapons, ladders and bleeding corpses were strewn everywhere. Behind the survivors the British muskets barked in reply but Stuart and Bontine, ducking and weaving, avoided the worst of the crossfire from the *tête-du-pont*. Outstripping the Highlander by several yards, Randall was first into the dry ditch. He hauled himself up the bank, sprinted to the base of the wall and flung himself against it. Looking back he could see how terrible had been the carnage wrought by the French cannon and almost despaired of finding any Scots survivors to give him support.

"Come along, damn you. Come along, come along," Randall shouted.

Iain Stuart's visage appeared above the rim of the ditch. His jaw was set, his eyes blazing. He lifted himself and waved the claymore to rally the lads who were cowering in the ditch. The ball penetrated the exact centre of Stuart's brow. He tottered and fell dead with the sword still in his fist.

Randall felt no grief whatsoever. Sentiment could not pierce his excitement. He saw no point in risking his neck to drag the major's body out of the gunfire. Instead he spun his sabre into both hands and raised it high so that the sun would catch it like a heliograph.

"To me, lads. Rally to me."

And, damn them, if they did not obey. The Highlanders clambered past Stuart's body as if it were nothing more than a dismembered branch. Their eyes were fixed on the Hussar. He would tell them what now was to be done and how best to do it. He would perform for them the service of thinking. Randall stepped away from the wall to make way for the first of the wooden ladders.

"Set it here and set it firm."

Four other ladders waved out of the ditch. Red-faced Sergeant McIver, still with his pipe in his mouth, directed the bearers as calmly as if he were taking a stroll on the sands of Morven. The ditch was piled with wounded infantry. French gunners were jabbering like parrots at the top of the wall. With ladders planted against the glacis, however, the sight-lines for the French defenders had become awkward. They scrambled to change position, to find loopholes and embrasures and, soon, would drop back on to the bulwark parapet. Randall could not see the parapet for the wall seemed to slide into the tinted sky, but he had the architecture of the fort imprinted in his mind and felt no doubt or uncertainty as he rapped out his commands. He knew what he would have to do, how he would have to be first up the first ladder and first on to the parapet.

"Steady it, lads. Steady. Hold the ropes now."

Randall unholstered his pistol and stuffed it into the breast of his tunic. The ladder was braced and the soldiers were staring at him. They were mere boys, farm-hands and shepherds, tanners' sons and candle-makers. They looked to him because of his breeding. They knew that he was made of finer stuff than they but, in battle at least, they did not resent it. Randall swung himself on to the ladder and raced up the rungs as nimbly as a squirrel, up to the lances and bayonets and swords which bristled at the top of the wall.

The assault was falling into place, however. British muskets had attained the ditch and their fire kept the French on the hop. The din was deafening. Grape pocked the earthen face of the wall as Randall hauled himself up the last few feet and, without hesitation, vaulted on to the parapet.

When they saw that Major Bontine had gained the fort, how the lads cheered and shouted and rattled on to the ladders. Major Bontine seemed immune to the shower of shot around him and, with sabre and bayonet, cut a swathe through the grenadiers like a reaper through corn. Those who saw it would later talk of the courage and strength of the Lowland laird, speak in awe of his single-handed attack and how he had held the parapet long enough for a dozen ladders to be cracked against the glacis and for the Highlanders to mount and clamber and flood into the roof of Fort Napoleon.

The redoubtable Sergeant McIver somehow found his way from the base of the ditch to the top of the scaling-ladder. He joined the major and the pair plunged onward, the sergeant's pike making short work of the handful of grenadiers who had tarried around the cannonades. Randall's sword passed through the breasts of old guardsmen with great bow-shaped moustaches and crimson cheeks and soon French blood plastered the sabre's hilt and trickled thickly down his arm. All around there was fighting. Roaring guttural war-cries, the Gordons swarmed on to the parapet so the boards were slippery with blood and, within minutes, cluttered with dead and wounded.

Randall glanced to the far end of the pontoon. The blaze of

French artillery from Fort Ragusa glared on the river but, through the bedlam around him, he could hear the drone of the pipes as the 92nd breached the fort's inner talus. The Light Infantry's right wing had poured into Napoleon and the Frenchies were driven back into the narrow yard in front of the barracks, hard against the bastion from which the flagstaff sprouted, gathering for a final stand around the tricolour.

The major punched McIver's arm and gestured. The sergeant needed no urging. He leapt down the steps from the breastworks into the thick of the fray below, with Randall on his heels.

Ahead, Randall could see the hedge of steel that protected the rag of French honour. When the flag was taken the surrender of Fort Napoleon would be inevitable. Between him and the inner yard, though, was a pit or demi-gorge filled with billets of timber and baskets of earth. The Hussar would not be deterred. Leaving the sergeant to protect his back, he ran forward and onto the tottering surface of the demi-gorge and was, for a minute or so, the only British soldier there, though eight or ten Highlanders crouched twenty yards behind, firing into the hedges.

"Give them Egypt!" Randall shouted.

In the sandals he was nimble on the debris and crossed the demi-gorge alone. Pikes and bayonets pointed at him fifty feet away, and he was target for a dozen guns. But the French had an officer who was as brave and resolute as Randall Bontine, just as willing to sup the rough red wine of glory.

He was, Randall reckoned, a dragoon of rank no higher than a captain. Tall and lean and agile, he wore a corselet and plumed helmet and was armed with a heavy sabre and a dagger. Randall felt a strange wave of happiness that caused him to throw back his head and laugh at the appropriateness of it all. It was as if he had finally encountered himself, in French garb, and must battle to survive not against an equal but a twin. The dragoon sensed it too and, grinning like a wolf, tipped his sword in salute. Randall stepped forward and raised his sabre.

The blades met, rang, parried by dagger and bayonet. Randall could smell the dragoon, smell the odour of Spain, earthy and corporeal, spiced with garlic and gunpowder. He locked the Frenchie's dagger hand at the wrist with the back of his right, reared on tiptoe and stabbed the bayonet into the fellow's back. The steel slid from the corselet then caught, tore upon cloth, then, under cloth, upon flesh. The dragoon kneed him and thrust him away. He sliced with a horizontal stroke, making the major dance backward. Blood, however, was spurting across the corselet. Randall shifted in for the kill. But the dragoon was also nimble and clever; Stuart would have called him 'a bonnie fechter'. He changed the pattern of the attack and without warning swung low. The French blade tore muscle clean to the bone from Randall's knee to his hip. He let out a cry of agony, sagged and fell.

Sergeant McIver's pike, swung like a flail, broke the French officer's neck before he could deliver the *coup* and the dagger caught Randall just below the ear. He hardly noticed the sting for he had lifted himself on hands and one knee and was roaring in triumph as the dragoon slumped stone-dead before him.

"McIver," Randall said. "Help me to my feet."

The sergeant, however, had gone charging on, anxious for his share of glory too, and just as ambitious as the officer. He cared not much of a jot for a man who was merely a Hussar and a damned Lowlander and was, in McIver's judgement, anyway as good as dead.

TWO

The Binding

High scudding cloud and blinks of sunlight were scattered over the Orrals by a warm, strenuous breeze from the west. On the moorland, gorse was stripped of its flower and petals clung to the heather like flakes of yellow sleet. The burn curled back on itself at the head of the glen making a horsehair crest which wetted the withered bracken for half a furlong. Michael had settled himself below the wind and had tied a plaid to two saplings for shelter. Today he carried no game-bag to hold herbs and plants, but instead had brought a basket from which he had unpacked a dish of cold chicken, a bottle of elderflower wine and two glasses.

It was their fifth meeting. Neither Michael nor Elspeth pretended that coincidence had a hand in it now.

Elspeth made her way down into the glen.

"Is there no dinner for you at Preaching Friar?"

Michael raised a wine-glass in greeting.

"It's a tidy step from Preaching Friar," he said. "I'm in need of sustenance before attempting a return journey."

"Why, tell me, do you subject yourself to such arduous exercise?"

Carefully he decanted wine and handed her a filled glass. "To bring you refreshment. My aunt has had this bottle in her cellar for three seasons. Give me your opinion of its flavour."

Elspeth sipped. "Delicious! But how do I know it doesn't contain a sleepin' draught?"

"Perhaps it does," Michael said. "Perhaps it's my intention to drug you, wrap you in my plaid and steal you away, never to be seen again."

"How would you transport me?"

"Across my shoulder."

"Like an old carpet?"

"I might carry you in my arms, if you'd prefer it."

The image, the thought of the closeness it would entail, warmed Elspeth. No matter how playful she might pretend to be, she had a plain need of Michael Blaven. She yearned for him, not yet as a lover, but to fill the hollows of her heart, to give her the youthful, intimate sort of friendship which James could not provide. Love, she was learning, had many shades and varieties. She had not been in love for long, not long enough to understand how love between two respectable, decent people should be expressed. She went on in the same slightly silly vein.

"I fear you would not get far," she said, "with me as a burden."

"I would carry you to the ends of the earth," said Michael.

"The ends of the earth, I imagine, might very well look just like the Orrals," said Elspeth.

Michael laughed, then, seriously, asked, "Did you not come yesterday?"

"I trust you're not chiding me."

"No, it was more of an observation."

"My husband took me to ride."

"I see."

"He is my husband, and does have call upon me."

"Of course," said Michael.

"I should not meet with you at all, here, in secret."

"I can hardly come rapping upon the door of Moss House," said Michael.

"No," said Elspeth. "It would not be the same."

"Have you informed your husband of my existence?"

Elspeth hesitated. She had no standard by which to judge Michael's intentions. James had not 'courted' her in any sense of that word. She had gone into the marriage as a contract, calculatingly.

There had been other men; the labourer at Dyers' Dyke – Peter Docherty – for instance, who had loved her and would have married her if she had wished it. Sometimes, just a little, she wished that she had taken up with Peter and not James. Though the life would have been harder, at least there would have been more honesty to it. Then there was Mr Rudge who, when tipsy after too much claret, would whisper to her in low, suggestive tones. She was both repelled and flattered by

Rudge's injudicious propositions but she did not resent Rudge as she resented James and, oddly, as she somewhat resented Michael. The young man from Preaching Friar had ruffled her, shaken her settled existence. She did not know yet if she could allow herself to love him, only that the possibility had been offered, not denied as with James.

"No," Elspeth said. "I haven't told James anythin' about you, not even that you exist. It would not be advisable."

"Would he prevent you seeing me again?"

"What would you expect? Of course he would."

"He would be a fool to do otherwise," Michael said. "I think, however, that I'm the greater fool."

"Oh? Why?"

"For allowing myself to be bewitched by you."

"Surely you don't suppose that I've bewitched you out of malice – if I've bewitched you at all?"

"I cannot say what reason you may have, Elspeth. You come here, you give me hope, you don't spurn me."

Elspeth had no answer, no remark which might lightly deny the truth of it.

"I say only that I am bewitched by you," Michael went on. "I can't think of anyone or anything else since the first day of meeting with you."

"Short acquaintance is not t' be trusted."

It did not seem at all like short acquaintance. How could she tell him that he had never been out of her thoughts, out of her dreams? Moment by moment she was slipping towards infidelity with giddy indifference to consequences. She hungered for the pleasure of yielding to impulse, of not being ruled by logic. If only she possessed an ounce of Anna's unscrupulousness, she might be in his arms now, might surrender to the passion that was in her. But she was not Anna and her vulnerability remained protected by stern common sense. She believed in duty, cared for comfort, and approached other natural desires with caution.

"Can you deny that you want me to take you in my arms?" Michael said.

"I could not trust you to stop there."

"Would you want me to stop there?"

He was forcing her into inviting him to make love to her. How could she possibly explain that she was still a virgin, that her husband had not consummated the marriage? Michael might suppose that she was to blame. She saw suddenly and very closely how James had demeaned her, how he had tarnished their relationship. Anger and guilt, feelings as insidious as they were inevitable in the bizarre circumstances of the marriage, had changed her already.

Michael took her silence for rejection.

"I'll not ask that question again," he said.

"I don't wish you to think that I'm – I'm –"

Now, suddenly, Michael understood – or thought he did.

"Never would I think such a thing," he said, emphatically. "I have too much respect for you, Elspeth. I can't separate you, for both our sakes, from your husband."

Confused, Elspeth hid behind a spat of anger. "How dare you even suggest it, Mister Blaven."

She played the love game as ladies were supposed to do, and hated herself for it. Modesty was only inch-deep in the aristocratic women whom she had met. Under their pale, sweet powder the great ladies were not at all refined but hung like field-lassies on the pleasure of being loved. There was a hypocrisy in them which Elspeth despised; but it was a hypocrisy which it seemed she must share.

"Even if you became miraculously free of your husband, I would not wish to separate you from your settled life in Balnesmoor," said Michael, ambiguously.

"I'm glad to hear it," said Elspeth. "You are takin' an excessive amount for granted, sir."

"I wish to be allowed to love you," Michael went on, "because there is no help for it. It has happened without my willing it. But I would not and will not, disadvantage you."

"Oh, but you *have* 'disadvantaged' me," replied Elspeth. "Can you not see? If I was a byre-lassie you'd not be so considerate of my feelin's, I fancy. You'd take me without a qualm."

"Is that how you regard me; as a heartless rake?"

"You put it too strongly but – yes – it's close enough to what I feel."

"Why?"

"Since you've told me nothin' of yourself and because you think that spinnin' pretty words will gain you your way."

"The words are not particularly pretty. Besides, I asked only for a kiss as a token, not as a preliminary to – to –"

"Aye," said Elspeth. "Have you no pretty word for *that*, Mister Blaven?"

"I want to remember you with a kiss." It did not sound insincere; she was tempted to believe him. "You see, I'll not be here for long."

"Leave now, if you wish," Elspeth said.

Michael glanced at the wine-bottle on the grass and at the dish of chicken which his aunt had painstakingly prepared, upon which sauce had congealed and petals of gorse had settled, with little black flies stuck and drowning in the gravy. Elspeth regretted her priggishness but she could not bring herself, however, to plunge into an affair even under the guise of love.

"Elspeth, I thought you cared for me."

"I do. I'd like to remain your friend, to meet –"

"It isn't enough."

"I cannot become anythin' more. A kiss won't change my mind, Michael," she said. "I canna. I'm wife already."

"Do you love him?"

"Aye, I do." She lied convincingly.

Michael put his head on one side and smiled with such wistfulness that all doubt fled from her mind. She felt as if she had deceived Michael Blaven and not James. The look on his face was so sad it near broke her heart.

"I came too late," Michael said. "Yes, I can see that. I came too late."

He knocked the bottle with his ankle and let the wine gurgle on to the grass, then stooped and swept aside the dish into the burn and snatched the blanket from the tree, tearing it from its strings. The movements were not angry but had an air of haste as if he had to attend to duty elsewhere.

"It was wrong of me," he said. "Yet I'll offer no apology. It's a careless fellow, not a trusting one, who would let his wife run wild on the moor."

"You don't know James or –"

"Ah, but I do, Elspeth. I know his sort too well."

"Michael?"

She moved to him, put her hand upon his shoulder and, lifting herself on her toes, kissed his mouth. The heat of his skin surprised her. She let her lips linger, hoping that he would toss away the plaid and wrap his arms about her, draw her tightly against him and never let her go again. But he accepted her kiss modestly, reticently.

When Elspeth separated from him, Michael sighed. In his eyes Elspeth still saw the sadness that she had not managed to diminish only, for a split second, to share.

Mother Moodie sat in the painted wood pergola looking wrinkled, inscrutable and wise. Her special high-backed chair, upon which she was toted about Moss House and its formal gardens, was padded with embroidered silk cushions. A richly-patterned shawl was tucked in crenellated folds across her knees. Draped around her shoulders was another shawl, heavy with scarlet tassels. Ranged close to her were three little ebony tables which bore dishes of sweetmeats and raisins, and decanters which contained her favourite cordials. No longer, however, did Mother Moodie use the symbols of plenitude to wreak havoc with the servants and exercise her ounce of power over them. Her expression of sagacity was a sham. The shrunken body under its burden of clothes was nothing but a receptacle for a brain as shrivelled as a winter pippin. Mother Moodie had turned senile.

Days went by when no word escaped the old woman's lips. On others, however, she would mutter, moan and snigger for hours on end and attain little peaks of excitement which would cause her to cry out - though whether in rage or in joy nobody, not even her son, could decide. For everyone who came into contact with her, including Carstairs, the smart young doctor from Blanefield who had replaced the venerable Rankellor, Mother Moodie's spasms of loquacity were only dotage drivel. James, however, was fascinated by them. He spent much time in her company, patient as a dog at a rat-hole, waiting for truth to emerge so that he might pounce on it, kill it and carry it away.

On that afternoon of wind and cloud James had ordered that his mother be taken outside and placed in the shelter he had built and furnished for her comfort.

Seated on a stool, James had been at his mother's side for an hour. She had said nothing and he doubted that she would that day since the features were shuttered and her eyes as remote as glaciers. What went on in her head was unfathomable and, every so often, James would lower the sheets of the *Glasgow Herald*, through which he browsed with an uncharacteristic aimlessness, and would contemplate the woman's implacable face, searching for signs. He feared that her condition might portend his own eventual decline, the irrational twilight in which only vague outlines of the personality could be defined and in which state, without guile, he might give up his secrets. At length James got up, stretched his arms and took a stroll down the strip of lawn which lay like a skittle-board between the hedges.

The wind was gusting strong and he was a little anxious about Elspeth who, so Tolland had informed him on his early return from Kennart, had gone walking upon the moor track. But, James reminded himself, Elspeth had been an active lass, used to the wide spaces of the Nettleburn and he could see no harm in her being out on the rough but protected track that backed the gardens of Moss House.

James showed no evidence of the slowing processes and flagging energies that affected some men in their middle years. His hair was dark and thick and he was careful at table not to let his appetite carry him into excess. Besides, he had a muscular frame, developed through thirty years of hard manual labour at his loom. He expected to live long. His maternal grandparents, in their nineties, were still alive, residing in a tithed cottage near the border town of Selkirk. He had called upon them on one occasion while visiting a stapler in that town, though his mother had not clapped eyes on her parents since the day of her marriage, sixty years since. James had sisters, married and settled out of the county, whom he hardly saw at all. No doubt, after his mother's death, communication between them would cease. He would not regret it. After all, he had found Elspeth. Elspeth was his present comfort, his future, his one and only love, the core and centre of his being.

James had just reached the stile which climbed the drystone wall when he saw her a quarter-mile or so out upon the moor. She was running. James stiffened, jumped to the stile and stood upon it. Shading his eyes he scanned the cloud-patched moor. There was nothing and nobody in pursuit of the girl, thank God. Smiling slightly he relaxed at the realisation that she was young enough to be filled still with what the French termed *joie de vivre*, the vital principle. He lifted his arm and waved. Elspeth did not notice him. She ran swiftly through the bracken away from the glen. She did not direct herself straight towards the stile but cut to the east, out of sight behind the pillared yew hedge. James had to wait five minutes for her to reappear. She was surprised – startled? – to find him by the stile.

"James, what's wrong?"

"Not a thing, dearest. I came home early today, there being little to occupy me at Kennart. I had it in mind," he helped her over the stile, "to travel out to Salter's to look at his lambs; but that chore can wait 'til tomorrow when, perhaps, you might care to accompany me."

"Aye, of course," she said.

James studied her, puzzled by a quality he could not identify. "Did you have a pleasurable excursion?"

"Very pleasurable," she said. "It's such a bracin' day."

He offered his arm. She took it, linking her elbow with his. She did not rub herself against him, stroke his hand with her fingers, offer any of the pleasant, intimate contacts which, in a normal marriage, a wife would freely accord to her husband.

She was, however, trembling.

"Have you caught chill?" said James.

"No, I – I ran a little because I – because I thought the rain might be comin'."

It had become his habit to doubt only himself, not Elspeth. For a brief, cold moment anger hovered on the edge of his consciousness. Did Elspeth not realise that she must be beyond reproach, that she must epitomise an integrity that could not be contaminated by suspicion?

Casually he said, "Is the glen wet?"

"I didn't go so far as that," she answered.

She was an inexpert teller of lies. He could have schooled her in that art too if it had been his wish. They had walked the length of the boxed-in lawn and Mother Moodie lay ahead of them. James was glad of the excuse to release Elspeth's arm, to break contact.

Rather too eagerly, Elspeth asked, "How is Mama today?"

"Sayin' not a word," James answered.

There was in the girl a natural tenderness. Even if she was shy of the old woman, she could respond sympathetically to her helplessness. It would have been a different sort of tale, of course, if Elspeth had been a cottar's wife and poor and the old woman had been cluttering the chimney corner and she, Elspeth, would have had to do all for her, lifting and laying and feeding, changing her soiled linen. Money made tenderness possible.

"Mother Moodie?" Elspeth knelt by the old woman's knee and peeped up into her expressionless features. "Would you like a wee drink now?"

Mother Moodie stared straight through her son's wife.

"It's one of those sort of days," said James, still watching Elspeth closely. "She needs no attention."

"Mother Moodie?" Still on her knees, Elspeth turned to look up at her husband. "She is so –"

Suddenly the old woman was keening, her withered hands waving as if to push away an unseen assailant. Elspeth leapt back from the base of the chair and sat down hard upon the grass.

For two or three seconds the old woman spoke intelligibly. "*Och, Jamie, no. No, Jamie. No. Och, no, no, Jamie.*" Then, twitching, she fell back into the cushions with her arms akimbo, still crying and dry-sobbing.

"Mother." James was by her immediately. "Mother, what is it? God, what ails you now?"

"Jamie, Jamie?"

"I'm here. I'm here."

But he was not there. The man who stalked the old woman was a figment from the past, someone out of the shadows. She fought feebly as James tried to calm her. Saliva ran down her chin instead of tears. It was the first bad fit she'd had for months. James was severely shaken by it, though, as soon as the memory passed like a cloud across the hill, the old woman was calm again except for a fretful, almost inaudible mutter of recrimination.

Awkwardly James placed his arm about her shoulders and glanced at Elspeth who had scrambled to her feet.

"What shall I do? Shall I send for Doctor Carstairs?" Elspeth said.

"No, it's over. She's forgotten it."

"It was so – so horrible."

"Aye." James sighed.

"She cried out for you, yet she didn't want you."

James lifted his forearm from his mother's shoulders and shook his head. "Not me. My father."

"She was frightened of your father?"

"I remember no hurt he gave her."

James spoke without conviction. It occurred to him that he had been privy to an incident of such intimacy that he could not bring his mind to dwell on it; nor could he stand there contemplating the husk of the woman who had once been pretty and desirable, irresistible to a bridegroom. He stepped away from the chair and started down the skittle-board lawn, calling over his shoulder, "Stay with her. I'll find Tolland and have her brought in."

"James?" Elspeth called.

But her husband had gone indoors.

Dinner was arranged for eight o'clock, the customary hour for the evening meal at Moss House. Having seen his mother settled and ensured that Betty would be in attendance in the chamber, James excused himself and retired to 'accounting' in the spartan study at the rear of the ground-floor corridor.

It was by no means uncommon for James to lock himself away for an hour or two before or after dinner with his ledgers and little cartularies. Elspeth had absorbed a deal of information on James Moodie's wool-cloth empire. She understood cash bargains, even the value of notes of credit and promissories, but the pyramidal nature of commercial finance, with transactions conducted on paper for commodities and stocks, seemed quite alien to the weaving trade.

James, however, had something other than commerce on his mind that night. He did not, in fact, go down the servants' corridor into the cell-like study. Instead he went out by the 'gun-room', a hexagonal inspiration of the architect of Moss House who could not believe that an occupant of his grand dwelling would care nothing for sport. The 'gun-room', devoid of sporting paraphernalia, contained a rack of stout boots and shoes and a pegged board from which hung tweed coats and capes, together with some weathered hats. Here James donned leather boots and a half-jacket and, hatless, slipped out of the door into the kitchen yard.

Stables and carriage mews lay a short distance from the house, separated from the kitchen gardens by a high wall.

James usually travelled in a gig or comfortable, well-sprung carriage. Tonight, however, he ordered the head horseman to saddle a sturdy pony for a trot. Mounted, James snecked the pony from the stable yard and swung it on to a track which led towards the quarries on the spur of the Orrals.

The pony was sure-footed and made swift passage across the heather scrub. Away towards Fintry the sky was dark with weather and coming dusk. James absorbed the gloom of the evening as he rode towards that quarter of the ridge from which he had seen Elspeth return, running, that afternoon.

Streaming over the moor the wind buffeted the weaver and wetted his neck with a few spots of rain as he guided the pony along the shoulder of the glen. He sat up tall and noticed the bottle immediately. Its regular shape made it obvious. James grunted, "Whoa," reined the pony to a halt and dismounted. He climbed down into the glen and crossed the burn. Hunkering, he examined the bottle then gingerly lifted it and sniffed the neck. The bottle was no relic of a tinkers' carousal; the dregs had not soured in the air.

Getting up, James poked about in the shrubs. He found the strings tied to the sapling and stared at them as if they were rare butterflies. They puzzled him and gave rise to depraved imaginings. He pried about beneath the small trees, but found nothing further there and extended his search upstream.

After ten minutes, the weaver decided that he had discovered all the 'evidence' that remained. He was convinced now that his wife had been here, had met with some person and enjoyed the assignation enough to bless it with a cup of wine.

Leaving the bottle where it lay, James climbed back to the pony. Spots of rain had thickened into drizzle. A haze veiled the summits and blotted out the lights of the villages. He gripped the saddle and swung himself into it. As he did so he caught sight of a man on pony-back, a man who had lingered just a moment too long. The rider was across the head of the glen, on a rock-crumbled knoll, prominent against the wet grey sky. The instant that James turned his head, the rider fled.

Fury welled up in James Moodie. He stabbed his boot-heels into the pony's flanks to start a pursuit but realised that the rider would be fast away before he could negotiate a crossing of the burn. Crippled by frustration, he slumped in the saddle, hand over his eyes, while the rain wound about his shoulders like wetted flax. The fact that the bottle found in the glen had contained wine and not whisky did not seem material, did not prevent James Moodie from leaping to a wrong conclusion.

It took the weaver several minutes to gain control over his emotions. Eventually he wheeled the pony's head into the rain to circle back to the stables, back to Moss House.

He would say nothing of his ride on to the Orrals, of his discovery. He would not remonstrate with Elspeth, demand explanations. But, by God in Heaven, he would watch over her so closely that she would never again have an opportunity to slip away to meet her brother-in-law, Matt Sinclair.

Anna's best efforts at being a good wife were spoiled by a kind of incompetence which Matt would have found laughable if he had not been its victim.

Stockings, clotted with suds, dangled from a sagging string over the hearth and dripped steadily into the pots which the girl had propped on the baking stones. Smocks, shirts and a pair of shapeless under-drawers were suspended from rafter nails making Matt obliged to steer a careful course through clammy garments to find his seat at the supper table. Out of the pots Anna ladled a feast fit for a king; yet somehow she had managed to over-salt the broth, singe the potatoes and leave the heart of the barley loaf as sticky as clay. She had done, however, her best. Liberal helpings of kail broth were followed by a mound of stovies, a mash of potatoes enriched with flakes of meat scraped from the bones of a hare they had had three days ago. Matt ignored the cinders and spooned the stuff greedily into his mouth. He washed it down with whisky and water; he no longer had any reason to be shy before Anna about his taste for Tomelty's smuggled malt. He was as hungry as a wolf tonight. He had worked damned hard all day long, not planting trees for the Bontines but delivering empty kegs to the bothy known as Tomelty's Well where Pad had installed his still in preparation for the cereal crops which would come off the fields in ten or twelve weeks' time.

Matt's deliveries were usually made without incident as he had been schooled in the lie of the land by Pad himself, a man to whom stealth was second nature. On the last drag down of the day, though, he had been sighted by somebody. He had beaten a hasty retreat into the plantations just in case the stranger was a King's officer strayed over from Aberfoyle. Matt was not particularly disturbed by the appearance of a rider on the Orrals. The mannie had only been paddling about in the glen, two miles or more from Pad Tomelty's hide.

Jacko, who had an aversion to soapsuds, was seated on Matt's foot, clinging to his shin. The monkey, Matt noticed, had been given a bowl of walnuts to crack, which showed that Anna had softened in her heart towards the wee creature. Matt had no clue as to why his wife had changed so. He put it down to the fact that she had realised that, after all, he might come into a position of power on Ottershaw. After serving, Anna took a chair and ate her own supper.

Matt pushed away his plate, belched, and leaned back. Jacko rubbed a dry nose against his knee and received in return a lackadaisical scratch on the brow.

Anna said, "I'll do it if you like, Matt."

Matt had been thinking of nothing in particular. Drowsiness was creeping over him from the strenuous day and the effects of the *aqua vitae*. Imagining that she meant something intimate, he shook himself out of languor, blinking.

"Wait a wee bit," he murmured.

Anna propped her elbows on the table and rested her chin on her fists. Matt had seen that look before. He sighed. There were times when not even a clout on the ear would dissuade his wife from her pleasure.

"Och, no," Anna said quickly. "I mean I'll talk to Elspeth about a loan of money."

"Loan?"

"For buyin' farm stock."

"Farm?" Matt pulled himself together. "Aye, why not? A loan might come in handy."

"I thought you were eager."

"That was – I mean, the sale's long over."

"Are there no other sales?"

"I thought you were dead set against talkin' to Elspeth."

"I see it as my duty, Matt."

Matt shrugged. The notion of escape from Ottershaw had been knocked out of his mind by acceptance into Pad Tomelty's band of smugglers.

Bontine's foresters, led by Kenneth McDonald, were into every money-minting trick. They operated with a cleverness that would have astounded Lachlan Sinclair. It had taken McDonald the best part of two years to decide that Matthew was no sneak sent in by the grieve to uncover their ruses. When he realised what was going on, Matt was delighted. Apart from anything else, division of the profits meant that he could begin to salt away shillings and pounds. In a year or two, he calculated, he might earn tenfold more from running whisky for Pad Tomelty than he would in wages.

"There is no sale right now, is that it?" said Anna.

Matt smiled, stretched lazily across the table and took her hand. He had been tempted to brag about his exploits, though they were tame enough, but he knew his wife too well to suppose that she could be depended upon to keep a tight lip. One murmur, one hint to old Lachlan and the grieve would not rest until he wrung the truth out of somebody, probably his son.

Matt said, "It's the war with the French."

Anna frowned. "What's Napoleon got to do with us lookin' out for a steadin'?"

"In a year or two, when the Frenchies are beat, when the affairs o' Ottershaw are put straight, my father says they'll see me raised."

"They?"

"He means Young Gibbie."

Anna made sense, somehow, of her husband's explanation. She nodded and brought his hand up to her cheek. Below the table Jacko clung more possessively to his master's ankle as if sensing what the courtship would lead to, namely him being stuck in his box. The drowsy, inattentive expression passed from Matt's face. He sat up and disengaged his hand from Anna's.

"But," Matt said, "if you think the time's ripe to put the tap on Elspeth, I'll not prevent you."

"For what, though?"

Matt stroked his chin thoughtfully and said, "Aye, speak wi' her. Butter her bloody paws. See if she'll cajole the weaver into partin' wi' some money; a loan, that is."

"How much?"

"Twenty guineas."

"Elspeth might do it, but the weaver'll need a reason."

"Why are you so eager to help me, all of a sudden?"

Flustered, Anna would not meet his eye. Matt was too intent on his own ideas to detect the guilty confusion in his wife. He would not have understood it in any case, since he had not been told of her rendezvous with the sisters of Eardmore. He would only have dismissed their readings and binding spells as daft lassies' cackle. It was, however, fear that had changed Anna, fear of the strange magic wrought by the dummy and her awful sister; fear that she would be bound by the spell and that Randall Bontine's unknown destiny would somehow be inextricably woven with her own.

"I'm sick o' Ottershaw," said Anna. "I want out o' this dismal place."

"To go where?"

"Somewhere far away."

Matt laughed wryly. "Take Jacko back to Guinea, eh?"

Her anger caught him by surprise. "I'm not makin' jokes, Matt."

"Verra well," he said. "If you wish to help me in my enterprise, Anna, speak with your sister."

"Only if you'll back me up, Matt."

"Aye, of course I will."

Anna snuffled and suddenly burst into tears. Taken aback, Matt detached the capuchin from his leg and hurried round the table to put an arm about his wife.

"Are ye sick?"

"I'm sick o' Ottershaw, that's all."

"I thought you liked Ottershaw."

"I *hate* it."

Matt put his cheek against her hair, shielded her with his chest and clapped her shoulder as if she had hiccoughs and not a queer black mood.

Anna said, "If I get Moodie to advance us a loan o' twenty guineas, will you look for a steadin' far from Ottershaw?"

"Aye," Matt answered. "If you raise the wind, I'll do the rest."

He meant it too – but not quite as his wife intended. Certainly he could find a use for twenty guineas. Given a measure of luck he would turn the sum into a small fortune, not by investing it in a patch of sour ground, not by breaking his bloody back for thirty years, but in a stroke, by a clever deal with the whisky-maker supreme, Mr Padric Tomelty himself.

On the north bank of the River Endrick, near the spot where women congregated to beat sheets and blankets, a clump of common comfrey flourished in the May-month sun. Miss Janet Blaven went on her own to select the best broad-leaved specimens which she uprooted intact with a trowel. Tinged with mauve, the white bell-flowers were pretty enough to grace a decorative spray but Miss Blaven had other less frivolous uses for the herb.

She carried the plants straight from the river walk to a work-block in the malting-shed at the back of Preaching Friar. There she extracted sap from roots and stems and preserved it in a globular bottle with a few drops of Hollands gin. Miss Blaven believed that there was a special potency in preparations made from new vernal growths. To relieve her nephew's distress every atom of restorative power would be required; however, she was only too well aware that Nature produced no substance which would heal the livid concretions in her nephew's lungs and extend his days on earth much beyond mid-winter.

If Michael had remained in Glasgow, lodged amid the stink and vitriol and bleaching gas, he would have been in his grave months ago. Janet Blaven could not understand why Michael's father – her brother Robert – was so stubborn as to insist that the boy must tread in the family's footsteps. It must have been apparent, even to Robert, that his youngest son was not fit enough to undertake intensive study in chemistry at Glasgow University and, later, at Leiden in The Netherlands. There were three other sons, all older and more robust than Michael, to manage the future of the St Cyrus Manufacturing Chemical Company, men already trained for the task and infected with the obsession that had possessed Robert and his father before him. There was also the spectre of disease in the Blavens' great square mansion in St Cyrus Street. Michael's mother had died of an internal abscess. Four of Robert's eight children, the entire female strain, had not survived to marriageable age. Janet's mother, also, had been seized by a wasting illness and been taken while she, Janet, was still in swaddling frocks. Asthmas and consumptions were, it seemed, destined to be the counterweights to wealth, balancings against which the Blavens must forever weigh their progress. Grief and loss had plated Robert and his sons. They could no longer see out of the cold clenching fog of commerce and chemical process and had, to their shame, written Michael off like a bad debt or a failed experiment.

She had rescued him from the sick-room in St Cyrus Street, whisked him away to Preaching Friar which had been her refuge from contamination for almost thirty years. Yet it had been 'vitriol' that had given her freedom, her share of the fortune which her father had amassed through his dedication and industry in the '70s and '80s. Preaching Friar, she occasionally reminded herself, floated on a sea of chlorine on a raft of dry bleach. It seemed a suitable sort of irony that Michael should find a sanctuary there.

In the past months Miss Blaven's locks had turned from grey to snow-white. She had not enough vanity to hide them under a wig. Hair apart, however, she did not look fifty-four. She was slender and still quick, and of resolute character. Though she attended kirk every Sabbath and never missed saying evening prayers, she did not believe in miracles. Consequently she did not expect God to unblock the impostume in her nephew's lungs. She had a leathery conviction that all things were written by divine hand. She put her trust in the promise that Michael would find the happiness which had been denied him when, at last, he was called to join the Host in Heaven. She prayed, though, that he would not suffer an excess of pain and would slip from her as lightly as a thistle seed plucked away by the breeze.

When Michael finally wakened from his long slumber it was wearing close to dusk. Thin humid rain had persisted intermittently throughout the week and no time seemed lost to the young man who, coughing, called out to her from the snug, whitewashed room beneath the eaves.

Miss Blaven went at once, carrying a tray with the bottle upon it and a jug of barley-water warmed from the kettle. She had been prepared for his wakening, for a rise in his fever and the torments of doubt that came with the sweat. But, to her surprise, he was not soaked in sweat. He sat upright against the bolster, waiting to speak with her.

"How long, Aunt, have I been incapacitated?"

"Five days."

"Ah, these summery colds. How they do persist."

"Aye, and not helped by catching a soaking on the Orrals," the woman said firmly. "Had you not brain enough to come home at once?"

His neck seemed as slender as a comfrey stem, his shoulders high under the crumpled cambric shirt. On the bolster were spots of blood, dried like tea-stains. Now that he was a little better she could sit him in a chair and change the linen on the bed. She had a daily maid but would not permit the girl to do anything for her nephew. She attended to his needs in person.

"I came home at once," Michael said.

"Nonsense, boy! Why, I could trot off the Orrals in an hour. Did you not *see* the clouds approaching?"

"I was – occupied."

"Searching for dandelions, I suppose?"

"Have I really been asleep for five days?"

"Yes."

She did not elaborate. It was quite usual for a period of deep sleep to wipe away the memory of the pain and restlessness which preceded it.

"I must be up soon. Abroad in the air. Taking my exercise," said Michael.

"When you are well again."

"I'm well now."

"I will tell you when you are well."

"I have to be – want to be abroad again."

"Why?" Aunt Janet enquired, bluntly.

"Is that barley-water? May I have a sup, please? I feel as if I had been wrung out like a clootie."

She poured him a glass, added ten drops of comfrey and held the vessel for him. He took it from her, his fingers shaking. She sat on the side of the bed, ready to assist, but he was determined to demonstrate that he was on the path to recovery and would be able to tramp again upon the high moor very soon. He drank the liquid in three gulps, sighed and let Aunt Janet take away the glass. She refilled it with cloudy barley-water and said again, "Why?"

He lay back against the bolster. She brought the glass to his lips and fed him more of the refreshing liquid. He did not protest or struggle to help himself.

"What sort of business have you devised that requires your presence?" she said.

"I have no business," he said.

"By the number of occasions you have trudged on to the Orrals –" Miss Blaven jerked the glass away as her nephew coughed. She scanned his face anxiously but the spasm was brief and not scouring. She went on, "– I thought you must have business there."

He laughed and shook his head. "I like the wild moor. I like to be upon it, under the sky."

"What do you do there? Pursue shadows – or something a trifle more substantial?"

Michael looked surprised. He could hide nothing from her in his weakened condition but she must be careful not to excite him.

"Macfarlane, the shepherd at Dyers' Dyke, has pretty daughters –" she said.

"Shepherds' daughters?" Michael interrupted.

"Perhaps a drover's lass?"

"Never!"

"Are you too genteel for country girls, Michael?"

"Oh, dear me, no!"

She saw that he had a need to confess, but was uncertain of her reaction. So it *was* a lass that had lured him out on to the moor. She felt a little stab of envy, followed instantly by a sorrow that she did not care to define.

She said, "Will I have to consult my mirror for an answer, Michael?"

He laughed again, nervously. "Yes, it is a young woman. But, truly, it's nothing."

"I'm intrigued," said Miss Blaven lightly, "by the place of the rendezvous."

"Hardly a rendezvous."

"What sort of young woman dwells on the high moor?"

"She does not dwell there. She walks there."

"Ah!"

"You sound disapproving."

"Not in the least."

"It's nothing," he said again. "Chance encounters, no more."

"Do you find her appealing?"

"Fair," he said, shrugging and pursing his lips. "Fair, as company."

"Fair of face?"

"Oh, indeed, indeed. That I cannot deny."

"Is she from Harlwood?"

It was out before he could prevent it. "Balnesmoor."

"And what, pray, would a respectable young beauty from Balnesmoor be doing upon the Orrals?"

"I told you, Aunt; taking the air, as I do."

"May I enquire the name of this smothered creature?"

"Her name is Elspeth."

His cheeks were fired by embarrassment, not fever. Nonetheless Miss Blaven's anxiety was immediate and palpable.

"Elspeth?" she said. "Of what family?"

Michael paused. Though he appeared jocular and relaxed, the woman sensed his tension. If he had not just passed through a bout of consumptive fever, he would not have told her at all.

"It's nothing, Aunt. How can it be?"

Miss Blaven ignored his question.

"What is her family name?"

"She is wife to Mister Moodie, if that's answer enough."

"Weaver Moodie's wife! Oh, Michael!"

She got to her feet, planted the glass on the tray by the bed, then, with a firmness that lay perilously close to anger, wagged her forefinger at him. "No more, Michael. Do you attend me? You will not meet with Moodie's wife, no matter how pretty, no matter how 'innocent'. You must not meet with her upon the Orrals or anywhere else again."

"Aunt." He struggled to lift himself. "I did nothing improper."

"Meeting her at all was improper. She's wife to another man."

"We only spoke together, that's all."

"Spoke of what?"

"Conversational matters."

"It must stop, Michael. No more rendezvous upon the moor. You will not see Mistress Moodie again."

"Aunt, I – I think I may be in love with her."

"Do not be a fool, Michael Blaven."

"I cannot help myself."

"You *must* help yourself. You must be strong in the matter. If she seeks to entice you –"

"How can you understand? Elspeth is not –"

"Whatever she may be, she is a married woman. Weaver Moodie would have every right to seek redress against her, if –"

"What are you telling me, Aunt Janet?"

She tried to control her outburst but could not. Even she could not be certain what so appalled her in Michael's admission. Perhaps it was the accumulation of gossip which had drifted out of Balnesmoor, stories which had had her maid all agog. She could not say that she had ever known Gaddy Cochran or her daughters, though she had seen them upon the road between the villages now and again. But she had a slight acquaintance with James Moodie and feared his cunning and his power. In Moodie was a similar sort of affectlessness to that which spurred on Robert Blaven and his sons. There was, however, also a moral consideration and, above all others, the thought that Michael might waste the last few precious months of his life in fruitless yearning for a woman who would bring nothing but misery.

"I tell you, Michael, you must not meet Mistress Moodie again."

"Aunt, I beg of you."

"I'll brook no argument, Michael."

"But she will think I have abandoned her."

"Elspeth Moodie may think what she likes. Besides, she's not yours to abandon. No, she's wedded to Moodie in the eyes of God."

"I would not harm a hair of her head."

The unfortunate conversation came to a sudden end, exploded by a spasm of coughing. Excitement had occasioned it; the body would not be denied.

"Lie back, Michael. Lie back."

Miss Blaven knew how to cope with corporeal crises. She ministered tenderly and devotedly to her nephew for the four nights and five days during which the hectic fever raged again; and first love was forgotten in the burning.

Randall hardly knew where he was or the name of the town into which he had stumbled twenty hours after parting company with the Highlanders.

Sir Rowland Hill had marched the division on, turning its face towards Castile, famous and romantic Castile, of old the land of warrior and troubadour, of love and chivalry, battle and song. There was no song in Randall Bontine's throat, though, and he did not give a Spanish damn now about love and chivalry. His one thought was to hold himself on the horse long enough to reach a surgeon who could repair his leg.

Pus and tabs of gangrenous flesh surrounded the wound and stained the bandages brown and green. Fearful spasms of pain threatened his sanity and made him useless as a fighting major. Besides, he had to find an adjutant of the 18th Hussars, one of the senior officers, Seaton or Hardy or Newberry-Price, who might ratify his period of leave and lay a trail which he might follow when he was healed and hearty once more, a trail to lead him back into the thick of battles yet to be fought. In the meantime, however, it was all he could do to cling to the saddle and nudge the beast onward. He kept telling himself that all would be well once he found a surgeon who was more than a bloody saw-bones, that all would be as it was before, that nothing about him had changed.

Dusty, stained and dishevelled Randall reached the town an hour after dark. A cold summer rain added to his misery. He found the town filled with French and British wounded, men brought down from forts and fields, though there had been no momentous battle in the past month. Erosion kept the hospital community busy and, as the Hussar swayed through the narrow streets, he could hear cries and groans of suffering coming from the open windows. On the piazzas of the marketplace, biers of the dead and beds of the maimed were laid out like goods for sale. 'On with the tourniquet and off with the limb' was the mode of medicine practised here. His swollen leg throbbed in sympathy. At length he brought the horse to a halt and shouted down to a poor crippled wretch who was struggling to learn how to stand upright with an improvised crutch.

"You. Is this Vacol? Have I reached Vacol?"

"Aye, sir. You have, sir," said the soldier, a Scot.

"Where's the surgeon's office?"

"Everywhere, sir."

"Are there no regiments here? No officers?"

"In the café by the Santa Clara gate, sir."

"Which direction is the gate?"

"Yonder, sir."

The soldier had propped himself up with the crude, olive-wood crutch. Out of pride and respect for rank, he kept himself upright while he conversed. He tried to salute and to point at the same time and fell, yelling, into the stone gutter at the base of the piazza steps.

Randall stared down at the crumpled heap.

Useless. The man was useless to the army now. He would be given a shilling or two, packed off home and left to fend for himself. It might take him a year to wend his way north to the glens unless he had charitable relatives who would send him the price of the coach. God, but he would have to learn quick how to spin himself about on the olive-wood stick or he would not survive even as a beggar in the streets.

The soldier, groaning, rowed himself into a sitting position and began the laborious process of hoisting himself upright. Randall saw that the man's leg had been hewn off from mid-thigh. Involuntarily he placed his hand on his own limb, as if to reassure himself that it was still in place.

"Who did this to you?" Randall asked.

"Frenchies, sir."

"The name of the surgeon, I mean."

"I never kenned his name, sir."

Fumbling, Randall fished a handful of *pesetas* from his pouch. A month ago he would have flung them into the gutter, uncaring; a month ago he would have spurned charity. The man crabbed forward at Randall's signal and took the coins gratefully. By the light of the flares on the walls, Randall saw that he was no man at all, just a boy of eighteen or nineteen who could not have been in the field for long. He had a wheaten stubble on his chin and round brown eyes like those of a milk-calf.

"Are the Hussars here?" Randall asked quietly.

"Some, sir. I was wi' the 40th."

"Thank you, soldier." Randall straightened in the saddle as the youth tried again to salute him.

"Sir?"

"Aye, lad?"

"Keep awa' from the surgeons, sir. They'll tak' no trouble, even wi' a gentleman. Any cure but the saw, they say, is a waste o' their precious time."

"I'll heed your advice."

Randall rode on in the direction of the Santa Clara gate but did not turn around when he heard a cry of pain behind him; the soldier had fallen again.

The café, bright-lit and rowdy, was built out from the wall of the town only a few steps from the gate. Painfully, Randall dismounted. He felt nauseous and hung on to the saddle for a moment or two until the lights stopped spinning and the ground steadied beneath his feet. The heat in his leg reached up into his groin and belly. Squinting, he fastened his gaze on the door of the café. Within would be soldiers, brother officers. He was determined that he would not collapse across the threshold, would not show unmanly weakness.

The horse snickered.

"Be patient, old chap," Randall muttered. "You'll have your feed, for you've a piece to take me yet if I'm not mistaken."

He tethered the animal to the rail and, making an immense effort, climbed the wooden steps and pushed through the moth-wing doors of the café into the heat and stench which if he had been hale would have revived him immediately.

The drinking-room was crowded with officers, some of whom had had their wounds dressed and, in defiance of the orders of *el medico*, were quaffing horn after horn of native wine. Little interest was shown by the assembly in the stranger and Randall insinuated himself into a position by the door. He leaned against the wall, waiting for pain to subside and his concentration to return so that he might study the faces in the room with attention.

Sweat beaded his brow and stippled the mixture of mud and grime upon his cheeks. He fought against the untenable indignity of crashing in a swoon before officers from three nations, for there were Frenchmen too, prisoners, mingled with the Britons and Spaniards. He had enjoyed many an evening in such company but tonight the merriment dinned in his ears and the reek of tobacco smoke and wine made his gorge rise. After several minutes, however, the pain diminished a little, sufficient to enable him to take control of it. He spotted Seaton, arm in a sling, seated in a corner close to the fire.

Seaton was engaged in uproarious conversation with an officer of the 50th whose head was bound in a bloody turban. Most of the officers wore bandages but their injuries did not dampen their enthusiasm for war and talk of war. Spanish officers were hunched over chess-tables, absorbed in their favourite game, forgetful of the conflict which was so vital to the liberty of their country. They seemed to bear out the cynical observation that if a Spaniard were given a cigar, sunshine and a flagon of Jerez, it would be all one to him whether Spain were ruled by Solomon or Caligula.

"Seaton, I say," Randall called, after clearing his throat.

Treading carefully, he hobbled between the tables and casks. Seaton turned, grinning.

"What paltry excuse is this you wear? Is it an elbow diseased through lifting too many drinking-horns, uh?" Randall said.

"Bontine, you old warhorse, you scallywag! Damn me, I thought the Highlanders had 'capitated you for their trophy room."

"God, but it's good to see the face of a fellow Hussar, even if it is one so ugly." Randall braced himself against the back of Seaton's chair.

Seaton looked in no better shape than he was himself, though quantities of wine had given the man's gaunt cheeks a simulation of health through heat and heavy sweating.

"Have you the acquaintance of Carfax?" said Seaton.

Carfax was a deal older than either of the Hussars and had begun to shed his hair. Disdaining a wig, he dipped a shiny forehead in greeting and gave Randall a wink. Carfax was deep in his cups, eyes as red and fiery as a boar's.

"Drink," he roared. "Ye'll take drink, will ye not, sir?"

"I will," said Randall, because it was expected of him.

He was handed a horn of hot brandy punch which he sipped with apparent relish.

Seaton was not so drunk as he appeared to be and, seeing Randall's condition, rose from the chair and put a hand on the major's epaulette. "What brings you here?"

"As with yourself, a touch of steel."

"Where? In the organs?"

"The height of the leg."

"Not too high, I trust; not so high that it imperils your performance."

"Fortunately not. But I am septic, I fear, and need attention."

"Was the field surgeon no good?"

"A leech. He would have had both legs off from the waist if I had not prevented it."

"And I would have been minus my fin." Seaton nodded at the sling in which his arm was cradled. "It proved to be little enough."

"Who is the best surgeon here?"

"Mendez."

"A Spaniard?"

"Aye, but a better surgeon than he is a barber."

"Where may I find him?"

"There."

A Spanish colonel was seated with a napkin and brass basin under his chin while the senior surgeon of his regiment – Mendez – delicately trimmed the pointed beard that graced the officer's face.

"So much for the dignity of the medical profession," said Randall. "Will he attend me?"

"If you ask him with an infusion of your customary charm," said Seaton, "perhaps he might be persuaded."

"Intrude, do you mean?"

"Aye, before he tackles his dinner," Seaton said, gesturing with his drinking-vessel.

Enveloped in a cloud of tobacco-smoke a snub-nosed British captain was busy preparing a German dish, the ingredients of which spilled from a haversack on the table beside him. He was shredding cabbage vigorously into a large tin trencher, adding pinches of pepper and sprinkles of vinegar from a bottle.

"Mendez has a British cook, does he?" said Randall.

"They are close friends. One cooks, the other eats."

"How will I –?"

"Approach and be haughty, Bontine," Seaton advised.

Randall nodded and made his way across the room to the place where the surgeon worked. He let phrases form themselves, a salmagundi of arrogance and humility which passed for courtesy in this country and to which the Spanish officers responded. The colonel was generous. The colonel agreed to release his surgeon-barber and Mendez led the major out of the crowded room into a side chamber.

Mendez was built like a fighting-bull, swarthy, muscular and impatient. He spoke no English and did not seem to be impressed by Bontine's fluent command of Spanish. His hands were covered with dark hairs from the colonel's beard. His tunic was stained with dinners past and, Randall noticed, with dried blood.

The Hussar did as bidden, though, without hesitation or protest. He hoisted himself on to a vegetable rack and let Mendez cut away the padding of the wound with a dagger. Mendez incised the leg of his riding-breeks almost up to the waist. He peeled away the cloth. Randall smelled the stench of the wound and after a hasty glance at its green oozing turned his head away and stared into the lantern that gave the chamber light. Mendez used the dagger tip as a probe. There was no pain. However much like a bull the surgeon might be in appearance he was dextrous and gentle in his professional work. The examination took no more than a minute.

In Spanish, Mendez said, "I will remove the limb and you will live."

Randall's mouth was as dry as a cornkist.

He cleared his throat. "What if I do not give you permission to remove the limb?"

"It will not serve you well, that leg."

"Will I, however, succumb to it?"

"How much will you pay me?" said Mendez.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"I am surgeon to a Spanish colonel, not a lackey to Wellington's army."

"It's your damned country we're here to save."

Mendez shrugged. "Have you English money? Gold coins? I will save both your leg and your life, Hussar, for the sum of twenty guineas."

"What if I cannot pay?"

"You will die, quite slowly and extremely painfully."

"Unless I find an English surgeon."

"Mendez laughs at your English surgeons."

"Can you really save the limb?" Randall asked.

"It will be a leg of wood."

"What?"

Mendez corrected himself. "It will not be wood, of course, but it will be as stiff as a piece of oak."

"Will I be able to ride?"

Mendez shook his head. "Only across the saddle, as ladies in your country do, and not at all for many months."

"Damn you!"

"Damn me if you wish," said the surgeon. "I will take my dinner now if you have nothing to offer me but curses."

"What can you accomplish that I cannot have done free by another surgeon?"

"I will unite the muscles with a stitching. It is expert work and difficult. I am skilled and have done it for many men. It will then be necessary to cleanse and anneal – do you understand me?"

"In what manner?" Randall asked.

"With heat."

"Cauterise it?"

"Yes."

"I've seen it done," said Randall. "It's not twenty guineas' worth."

"You will scream with the pain of it, sir, though I will not plunge a poker into the opening. No, that is not how Mendez seals wounds. I will attend to each piece of rotted flesh as if it was my own. The work will be prolonged and you will swoon. If you do not swoon, Hussar, I will be obliged to have my assistant knock you on the head lest the pain turns you mad."

Randall smiled. "You do promise value, Señor Mendez."

"I promise you life. I will leave you with a limb of sorts, enough to fill your trouser and put into your boot."

"When can it be done?"

"As soon as is convenient to you. Tonight, if you wish, after I have eaten my dinner," said Mendez.

"Where?"

"Here," said Mendez. "Unless you would prefer to put your courage on display before half a hundred intoxicated gentlemen who will no doubt wager on whether you will live or die under my ministrations."

"So be it," said Randall. "I will await your attention when you are ready, Señor Mendez."

"I await sight of my twenty guinea pieces. I have no intention of sharpening my knives until I see the colour of gold upon the table."

"Twenty guineas," said Randall, fishing a leather purse from his pocket and tipping out the heavy coins.

"Excellent," said Mendez. "We will commence in one hour."

"Mendez, what if I do not survive?"

The surgeon laughed and fluttered his sturdy hands.

"I will give you your money back," he said.

Anna hesitated at the iron gate which separated Moss House from the public highway. She brushed the front of her dress and adjusted her bonnet before she slid back the bolt, pushed open the gate and apprehensively entered the garden. She walked gingerly up the path to the front door. As sister, no less, to the lady of the house it would not be seemly to present herself round the back like a common servant.

Ivy rustled on the old walls and swallows darted under brooding eaves. Bees droned in a swarm-hole under an ornamental rose at the base of the chimney. Sunlight turned the oriel windows to copper. Even so, Anna refused to be impressed. It was a plain house, she told herself, not so ancient as it pretended to be, and not so very large either.

She reached up and gave the black iron bell-pull a vicious tug.

One minute later the door swung open and Tolland confronted her.

"Aye, madam? Is there something you are requirin'?"

"I'm requirin' conversation with Mistress Moodie," said Anna, scowling.

"Does madam no' have an appointment?"

"No, I do not."

"Who, if one may enquire without offence, is madam?"

"You ken fine who I am."

Tolland peered down his nose. "Madam Sinclair, is it not?"

"Fetch my sister here, Mister Tolland, since you seem bent on keepin' me on the stoup like a bacon-seller."

The reprimand was delivered with snap, though Anna was, in reality, awed by the stiff-mannered man in cream vest and broad-striped shirt.

"Anna? Anna?"

Tolland turned, a shade nonplussed. Elspeth appeared at his side.

"Why, it is Anna. I thought I heard your voice. This is a most pleasant surprise. Come away in, dearest." She gestured in welcome, then, to Tolland, said, "What's wrong with you, Tolland? Did you not recognise my sister?"

Tolland had dignity and sense. He did not protest or try to defend his negligence.

He bowed.

Anna gave him a black glance as she whisked past him.

"We'll take tea, Tolland. Please ask one of the maids to bring it," said Elspeth. "We'll be in the parlour."

"The drawing-room, madam?"

"Aye, the drawing-room."

"Will madam also be requirin' bread and butter?"

"Of course, Tolland. And cake."

Three or four years ago, when they were girls on the Nettleburn together, Anna would have nudged her sister and made some cutting remark about the pompous steward but she had lost that sort of intimacy with Elspeth long since. She could not be sure that Elspeth did not approve of Tolland, would not regard her criticism as a sign of vulgarity.

Elspeth pushed open the doors of the drawing-room and let Anna enter first.

Although Elspeth had not expected company, she was dressed as for a ball in a frock with an untrained skirt and a bodice of forget-me-nots. On her feet were sandals of gold cloth laced with two minute, pale-blue tassels – so exquisite that just noticing them made Anna feel as lumpy and lame as a heifer with a festered hoof. Elspeth's hair-style had been altered since last the sisters had met. It was now cropped quite short and loose, with an air of arranged casualness to it. The lightness suited Elspeth who, in spite of being tall, had a fineness and delicacy of feature that had emerged with womanhood.

Anna clumped behind her sister into the sun-filled drawing-room.

The furniture was dainty and unpretentious, chairs and a couch in pale-green velvet, an oval table waxed to a deep brown shine, side tables, a fender of painted iron and, since it was summer, white muslin curtains wafting at the long windows. To Anna's way of thinking the room demonstrated her sister's softening presence and gave evidence of a taste which she, Anna, did not possess. On the other hand, she reminded herself, Elspeth did not have to crawl on her knees to polish the skirting, haul out the rugs to beat, nor have to balance on a stool in order to burnish the curtain rings every morning without fail. By God, what a time of it Jacko could have in a room like this!

"Do sit yourself down, Anna."

Elspeth seemed to be excited at Anna's unannounced visit. She was never all 'swanny', inhibited by manners, when in her sister's company, yet Anna felt that the welcome was over-effusive.

"You're lookin' very fashionable," Elspeth remarked.

"It's only my old Sabbath dress," said Anna. "You've seen it often enough."

"Sit down, please."

"Where'll I sit?"

"Take the couch."

Uneasily Anna settled herself on the couch.

"Tea will be along in a moment," Elspeth fussed, then seated herself by Anna's side and took her sister's hands. "It *is* good to see you, Anna. I miss you."

Anna extricated her hands and folded them in her lap.

"Very nice of you to say so, Elspeth."

"How is Matt?"

"He's fine."

"Were you working this morning?" A certain formal correctness elevated Elspeth's speech. "At Ottershaw, I mean."

"Aye."

Four maids attended to the morning milking and did other chores, mainly sluicing and shifting, until three o'clock. Four other lassies, married women, took over for the evening milking, a system which Sinclair had introduced and which was unique to Ottershaw.

"Have there been many changes since old Sir Gilbert went?" Elspeth trundled the conversation along.

"No, hardly any."

"What of Mister Randall?"

"What of him?"

"Will he come back?"

"How would I know? I'm not privy to Ottershaw secrets."

"I thought maybe Mister Sinclair –"

"Bloody Mister Sinclair; he'll hardly cross the time o' day with Matt or me." Anna sniffed and shifted an inch further away from her sister. "You seem to be doin' fine."

"Yes," said Elspeth. "Yes, I am."

"It was a grand catch ye made, Elspeth, no denyin' it."

"James looks after me very well."

The stilted conversation limped to a halt; three or four seconds of silence, with just the *tock-tock-tock* of some solemn big clock in an adjacent chamber.

Anna said, "Is he not pressin' you for a bairn yet?"

"No, not yet," said Elspeth.

"At his age he canna wait long."

"Anna," said Elspeth, "is that why you've called today? Are you carryin'?"

"'Deed I'm not," said Anna. "'Deed I am not."

Silence again; three, four, five, six seconds of it counted out by the timepiece invisible.

Anna said, "I've come here to request a favour."

"What sort of favour?" said Elspeth.

"Matt an' me have –"

Much to her consternation a discreet knock upon the door interrupted Anna's pitch. A silver tray, big as a cart-wheel and worth more than Matt earned in a year, was carried in by a young girl, Moira Kerr, who was not one of the resident servants but came daily from the village. She was sister to a lass with whom Elspeth and Anna had gone to school, one of a large family of Kerrs, several of whom were now employed at Kennart. Elspeth had grown used to her role as mistress to old acquaintances but it startled Anna to see Moira there, acting menial and humble.

"Thank you, Kerr." Elspeth had finally learned that it was proper to address servants, in the Edinburgh fashion, only by surname. "Put it upon the oval table an' I will do the pouring presently."

The girl set down the tray and turned towards the door, eyes cast down.

"Kerr."

"Aye, Mistress Moodie?"

"I believe you are acquaintit with my sister."

Kerr squinted suspiciously at Anna.

"You may wish her a good afternoon, Kerr."

Obediently Kerr gave a bob of recognition. Anna responded with a nod. No words were exchanged, in contrast to the hearty, strident sort of greeting they would have given each other 'outside' Moss House. The distortions of normal behaviour which Elspeth's marriage to James Simpson Moodie had generated suddenly became apparent to Anna. She felt resentment rise in her gorge but she said not a thing as Kerr was dismissed. Next Elspeth went through the ritual of pouring tea, offering silver water jugs and sugar lumps and milk, slices of fine bread spread with butter, seed cake the colour of a marigold. It was a fussy, prolonged palaver. Anna suffered it only because she did not wish to antagonise her sister or to seem gauche in her eyes.

Soon the girls were seated with teacups and saucers, bone-china plates and silver knives no heavier than grass-blades balanced on their knees. Thus fettered, Anna felt even more awkward.

"I believe you were goin' to ask me for a favour," Elspeth said.

Anna swallowed a lump of bread and butter, coughed, sipped tea. "Aye, I was."

"What is the nature of this favour?"

Anna disposed of the crockery, putting the items on to a side table by the couch.

"Matt's of a mind t' leave Balnesmoor."

"Ah!" Elspeth cocked her head and went on snipping at a limp slice of bread with her teeth. "Is it the animosity between him an' his father that's at the back of it?"

"Aye, that's the cause. The quarrel's been festerin' for years," said Anna, relieved of having to invent motives.

How could she possibly explain to her sister that she was here not at Matt's urging but because she was afraid of Randall Bontine, afraid of a daft curse laid by the Sylases of Eardmore? Cocooned in luxury, Elspeth would not understand. Best, therefore, to follow Elspeth's lead and let her think it was all Matt's doing. Besides, Elspeth had always had a soft spot for Matt and might do for the man what she would not do for her sister.

"Matt's of a mind," Anna continued, "to buy gear for a steadin' of our own."

"Not, I take it, in Balnesmoor or Ottershaw?"

"Far away," said Anna. "Out of reach o' Mister Sinclair."

"Does Matt not have prospects on Ottershaw?"

"Not since his marriage to me."

"This steadin'," said Elspeth, sitting forward, "it surely would not be large?"

"It would be as large as we could furnish."

"I have no money of my own, Anna."

"Moodie – James, I mean – he'd lend it to you, would he not?"

"I wouldn't dare ask him."

Anna frowned. "Why not, tell me?"

"I'm his wife, Anna. A wife doesn't ask her husband for money."

"I would if I were you."

"Perhaps you would. But if you did, your husband would be right to be angry with you."

"I canna understand why," said Anna.

"I'm part of his property," said Elspeth, without a whimper of self-pity. "I belong to him."

"He shares –"

"He gives. He doesn't share. It's not right for a man to share. I'm here in Moss House only because James took me in."

If Anna had been raised more conventionally she would not have remained deaf and blind to the clatter of how marriages were forged, the new processes, the new beliefs. She regarded herself as Matt's equal, if not his superior. She was astonished that Elspeth subscribed to such an unnatural division between man and woman.

Anna said, "Ask him if he'll make a loan then, a loan of capital to Matt."

"How would the loan be repaid?"

"Out o' earnin's."

"Earnin's from a steadin'?" said Elspeth.

"Mammy managed it."

"Stuff!" said Elspeth. "Mammy wouldn't have managed at all if it hadn't been for Daddy, for Coll. We would have wasted to bone, you an' I, if we'd depended on income scratched from the patch by the Nettleburn. Mammy sold cattle, an' Daddy paid her to do it."

"Matt could sell cattle."

"Matt knows nothin' about cattle."

"He could learn."

"Could he? How long would that take?"

"Sheep, then."

"Sheep? I doubt if Matt can tell a Leicester from a Suffolk."

"Aye, an' what *is* the startlin' difference, then?" cried Anna, to show, stupidly, that breeding did not matter when it came to raising. "A sheep's a sheep."

"Leicesters provide long wool an' are excellent for cross-breedin'," said Elspeth. "Suffolks give short wool an' rare mutton."

"Matt could learn that, the way you've learned it."

"I learn from an expert," said Elspeth. "Who would teach Matt?"

"It's me, is it not? You'll not lend money to me because I won Matt for a husband instead of you."

"That might have been true three years ago, but it was only childish infatuation. Anna, dearest, you've got to realise that my husband's an entirely practical man. He started with a handloom an' built the Kennart mill."

"Would James not give Matt an opportunity to prove himself? Nobody else will. Not even his father. How can Matt learn if nobody'll let him learn? How can he advance in life if nobody'll encourage him to take one forward step?"

"Advance where?" said Elspeth. "James would say Matt has advanced enough for a young man. Better if Matt put his quarrel with his father to rights an' settled for being a future grieve of Ottershaw."

"Twenty pounds," said Anna, almost pleading "Twenty pounds would do it. We could go off wi' just twenty pounds. Start anew. Begin properly. If not a loan, a gift, Elspeth. I beg it, for Matt's sake."

"If I had capital of my own, more than the few guineas Mammy left, I'd let you have it willingly, but I'm as poor as you are. It would have to come from James an' I'll not even put it to him."

"Mean!" Anna hurled herself to her feet. "You're mean-spirited, Elspeth Cochran. You always were. It's out of spite you're doin' this to me an' my husband."

"I'm only giving you the sort of answer James would give me," said Elspeth.

"Aye, an' he's mean. He's graspin'. Everybody knows that."

Elspeth rose to her feet too. She put down the saucer and plate carefully. Her cheeks were flushed with embarrassment.

"Anna, I canna do what I've no power t' do," she said, lapsing into the rough accent of her girlhood. "James'll have none o' lendin', an' none o' givin', not least to Matt Sinclair who is well fitted in life as it is."

"Aye, if you call bein' a tree-planter well fitted; if you call bidin' in a dank cottage in the deep woods well fitted; if you call bein' ignored –" Anna gathered her skirts in her hand and swung towards the door with a toss of her head. "Never heed! Never heed! I apologise for takin' up your precious time, Mistress Moodie. You'll ha'e no more bother from me, never fear."

"Anna, please. Don't you see how it is?"

At the drawing-room door, Anna paused, an expression of injured pride upon her face.

"I'll be biddin' you good day," she said.

"Anna." Elspeth spoke softly. "I'll – I'll talk to James."

"Och, don't trouble yourself. We'll manage, Matt an' me."

"What do you want?" said Elspeth. "Is it just twenty pounds?"

"I want to be far away," Anna cried. "Somewhere other than Ottershaw an' Balnesmoor. I'm stifled here. Smothered. Sick of the Lennox."

"I'll – I'll put it to James."

Abruptly Anna was once more composed. She did not permit Elspeth to approach her, however, or to touch her.

"Suit yourself," Anna said and, without another word, left the drawing-room and Moss House.

THREE

Breaking the Will

Hildebrand droned on, "Now, as I understand it from your letter of introduction, it is your wish and charge that I inform you in confidence of the procedures of the law in relation to inheritance specific to the deed and testament issued from the hand of the landowner of the estates of Balnesmoor and Ottershaw – to wit, Sir Gilbert Bontine, late deceased – of which you have provided me with fair and accurate copies for scrutiny. Is this a fact?"

Alicia Bontine gave assent with a sweeping motion of her slender hand, since breeding would not permit a mere nod of the head.

"Is this a fact, sir?" Angus Hildebrand required a double assurance, it seemed.

"Certainly, certainly," Gilbert answered.

Hildebrand had stopped his infernal pacing and leaned over his table to search the clients' faces as if to detect in them some trace of prevarication or evasion. Finding none, the lawyer continued, stepping off on another march up and down the floor in front of the long, rain-speckled window. Gilbert groaned inwardly.

"Whenever the succession to property is not left to the operation of the law but is contained in a deed of settlement, one heir being, as it were, substituted for another, the estate is said to be entailed and the heir may be deemed the heir of entail. The person upon whom the estate is first settled is known as the 'institute' and the remaining person or persons as heirs of entail or 'substitutes'."

Up and down, up and down, as if the fellow's mental faculties only operated in conjunction with his feet; Gilbert had recognised the style of the Dumbarton lawyer; the fellow was a fair and accurate copy of a master of Greek and Latin who had made his life a misery during his two years of study at the infamous High School of Edinburgh.

Gibbie had retained virtually no Latin, even less Greek and was about as interested in the mechanics of the law as he was in the mechanics of windmills. He was interested, however, in the *outcome* of the law, what the law might do for him in besting Randall. He therefore put up with Alicia's scheme to seek the aid of an independent and unbiased gentleman of the law, separate from the Bontines' traditional legal advisers, Mr Dixon and Mr Royle.

"The effect of deeds depends upon the terms under which they are conceived. Three divisions are set down under the law, each possessing, as it were, a different degree of force."

Nothing would stop Hildebrand. Such men were irresistible.

"The divisions are – first, entails containing a simple destination. Secondly, entails with prohibitory clauses. Thirdly, entails that are guarded with irritant and resolutive clauses."

Dead flies, victims of monotony perhaps, decorated the narrow ledge under the panes. Dust like oat chaff coated the books and deed boxes which were mounded on the cabinets that lined the chamber. The chamber itself was perched on top of a close in the Cross Vennel and shared a stair with brothers from the Freemasons' Lodge whose premises were adjacent to it.

"Let us consider, then, the effect of the first two kinds in relationship to the deed and testament before us." Hildebrand had his thumbs hooked into his vest and marched with a strut. "When a proprietor settles his estates upon a series of heirs, substituted one after another, but without laying restraint upon members, or heirs of entail, as they come to succeed, or prohibiting them from altering the course of succession which he has nominated, the deed is a simple destination."

"Did my father do so?" interrupted Gilbert, wishing, on the instant, that he had held his tongue.

Alicia and Hildebrand both gave him such ferocious stares that he might have cowered beneath the table if he had had the space to do so. But Gilbert was tall and angular and, even at an age short of life's prime, was hardly sinuous. He stiffened on the uncomfortable chair and mumbled apology.

"Pray continue, Mister Hildebrand," said Alicia.

Hildebrand sniffed.

"Without interruption," Alicia added, threateningly.

Did she not know that Hildebrand would take her at her word? The only method of dealing with fellows like the lawyer was to prod them along. But he was no prodder. He had no ounce of push in him, a deficiency which Randall and his sisters, even his amiable stepmother, had been at pains to remark upon when he was growing up.

Hildebrand began again. "A deed of simple destination has the effect that the order of succession pointed to in the entail is to be observed so long as no alteration is made by any of the heirs, or heir, succeeding to the estate; but as the heir in possession is an unlimited fiar, he is entitled to alienate the lands and to alter the order of succession in the same manner that the maker might have done."

It was on the very tip of Gilbert's tongue to cry out, "Can Randall do that?" when he received a sharp tap upon the kneecap from his wife's reticule.

"The clause of destination, therefore, merely grants to the substitutes a hope of succession which is entirely dependent on the will of the heirs of first succession." Angus Hildebrand stooped. "Is this fact clear?"

"Perfectly, perfectly," said Gilbert.

"Besides the destination, the deed may contain different prohibitions upon the heirs, intended for the purpose of preserving the succession to a series of heirs nominated by the maker." Hildebrand paused. "No such a prohibitory clause exists in the settlement set forth by Sir Gilbert Bontine's hand. We will, therefore, not embellish the clause with further exhibitions."

That, thought Gilbert, should save an hour or two at least.

Alicia gave Hildebrand a signal and Hildebrand, who was a gentleman of some perspicacity, deferred to the woman who was, in his opinion, instigator of the consultation and would probably be the one who had his fee paid.

"May I enquire, Mister Hildebrand, how much of this fascinating elucidation is pertinent to the deed and testament of my late father-in-law?"

"In the matter of 'elucidation' all things are pertinent, Mistress Bontine."

"Is there, however, in the testament, a prohibitory clause at all, anything which may legally prevent Randall, the eldest son and apparent inheritor of the estate, from doing as he wishes with it?

"Not," said Hildebrand, "that I can see."

"Am I to take it that, having perused the documents carefully, you can find no means of preparing an appeal to a court?"

"An appeal, Mistress Bontine?"

"To redeem for my husband that which is – morally, shall we say – rightfully his?"

"To wit?" said Hildebrand.

"To wit, Ottershaw."

The question, though hardly direct as Gilbert recognised it, was direct enough.

It gave the lawyer pause.

From outside came the rumble of a cart and an exchange between two mongers, vociferously peppered with oaths. A large bluebottle, on its last legs, stammered against a corner of the window and, as Gilbert watched, dizzied down and fell to the window ledge where it lay on its back with its legs kicking; an analogy for his claim to the mansion and lands of Ottershaw which he sensed was also dying on its feet.

"Can," Alicia went on, "a case be prepared for challenging the legality of the deed?"

"Not when it is taken in conjunction with the testament," said Hildebrand.

Alicia sucked her teeth. It was an ill-mannered habit which she had never been able to break, a sign that she was perturbed. It ruined the elongated line of her profile which, in candlelight and shadow in particular, was handsome, and also made the wisps of dark hair which lately had appeared on her upper lip more evident, like the whiskers of a cat. Gilbert wished that she would not suck her teeth, but he did not chide her, not even gently, at this moment.

After all, what Hildebrand had to say about the deed and testament was crucial to his future. He would not be left homeless or penniless; Father had not been so cruel and remiss as to exclude him, or any of his children, from an inheritance of monetary value. But it was Ottershaw that Alicia wanted. Anything less than the whole pudding would not do.

"Is it impossible?" said Alicia.

"How many offspring, living, survive Sir Gilbert?"

Gilbert answered, "Eleven."

"Eleven? Is that a fact? Male issue?"

"Three," said Alicia before her husband could open his mouth. "Randall, Gilbert and Robert."

"Robert," Gilbert put in, "is my half-brother. He is the son of my father's second wife, and a good deal younger than Randall and I."

"What age is he?"

"Thirteen."

"Does he reside at Ottershaw, in the bosom of the family?"

"He resides, mainly, in Ireland with his mother and my uncle," said Gilbert. "Since my father's demise my stepmother has been much away from Ottershaw and, indeed, plans to make her home in Marinwood in Ireland."

Gilbert did not embellish these simple declarations of fact. It was no business of Angus Hildebrand that Alicia had successfully driven his stepmother out of Ottershaw, not by demand but, rather, by an excess of devotion; devotion coupled with discipline and authority.

"There is, I see, a sizeable settlement of money laid upon the widow," Hildebrand stated, lifting the bulky testament. "I assume that such legacy, and others mentioned, can be met from resources without the selling of land or leases?"

"Yes," said Alicia, who had personally gone through the documents with a bone-comb. "It has been established that it will not be necessary for my husband, or for any inheritor of Ottershaw, to sell property or tack. Sir Gilbert was wise enough to ensure that there was money in the banking houses, sufficient to meet the legacies, without recourse to selling part of Ottershaw."

"Does that include the seven thousand pounds which is allotted to your husband?" said Hildebrand who, whatever his failings as an explicator, had certainly studied and mastered the testament.

Gilbert glanced at Alicia; he had not thought to ask.

Alicia answered promptly. "It does, Mister Hildebrand."

Hildebrand said, "It is therefore clear that the disposition of the moveable property, which affair is in the hands of the appointed executors, is fused with the deed. The will and testament cannot convey heritage; that is the business of the deed and document pertaining. But, according to my reading of it, the paying-out of legacies precludes the disposition of further moveables attached to the estate itself – to wit, the whole goods, gear, tack and household furnishings – which are to be handed with the land and buildings to the full-blood, senior, male heir."

"Randall," said Gilbert, nodding.

In his latter years his father might have appeared a wool-gathering dreamer, reclusive and unworldly, but the blood of the Bontines still oozed through his aged veins and suffused a Bontine brain. Sir Gilbert had redrafted the testament, along with the heritable deed, six years ago.

"The intention and stipulation of the testator is clear," said Hildebrand. "He wished the elder full-blood son to have Ottershaw, its lands and its rented properties, intact, and to preserve them intact."

"It's unfair," said Alicia, a phrase she had been repeating at regular intervals since the will of old Sir Gilbert had been made known.

Gilbert tended to agree with his wife. It was not that he wanted the power or the income that came from Ottershaw, just that he, and not Randall, had given it his attention during the past decade.

Randall had chosen to turn his back on Ottershaw and Balnesmoor, to forsake the life of a laird of the parish in favour of the roving, adventurous life of a soldier. Randall had mocked the stay-at-home. Yet it was Randall who would inherit Ottershaw, who would turn Gibbie and Alicia and their children out, who would have to learn the arts and crafts of landownership from the beginning and take responsibility for the tenantry. Alicia was right; it was unfair.

Gilbert said, "It was, however, how my father in his wisdom wished it to be."

Hildebrand said, "I take it as a fact that the testator was of sound mind up to the date upon the testament?"

"A matter of definition and opinion," said Alicia.

Gilbert leaned forward urgently. "My father's mind was as clear as spring water right to his last hour."

"Therefore his reason and competency might not be grounds for challenge?"

"Certainly not," said Gilbert.

Alicia tutted but did not disagree with her husband. There were far too many reliable witnesses to attest that Sir Gilbert had been of sound mind and disposing judgement when the documents were drafted.

Hildebrand said, "That being the case, I regret that I can offer no immediate, practical assistance in the matter of obtaining redefinition of the deed or the testament. The law, unfortunately for some, is not like a horseshoe which might be bent and recast at will."

The lawyer began again to walk up and down. He did not notice, or elected to ignore, the bluebottle's death dance or the battle royal between the mongers in the street outside the window.

Hildebrand went on, "The authorities are strict upon several points of the law of inheritance. If I might cite a case of note for the interest it contains – to wit, the action of Lord Strathnaver versus the Duke of Douglas."

Gilbert had had enough. To Alicia's surprise and Hildebrand's consternation, the man got to his feet and interrupted the speech.

Gilbert said, "We're grateful for your advice, sir. May I ask in conclusion if there is anything at all to be done, if not to secure the estate of Ottershaw for myself, to secure it for my children, of whom I have four?"

"Nothing can be done expediently and directly."

"I see. Well, you have our thanks." Gilbert shook the lawyer by the hand.

Hildebrand, Gilbert thought, looked unwarrantably glum. Perhaps it had been his intention to milk Alicia's determination to have Ottershaw for their branch and draw fees for months to come. Gilbert had never shared Alicia's belief that the estate's lawyers were prejudiced in favour of Randall. They were merely executors and fulfillers of the wishes of his father. Unfair it may be; Randall had no interest in the Lennox estate, no interest in the continuation of the traditions attached to the family and the place. But it was how Father had chosen to dispose of it. Rank and power must continue to accompany wealth and, by leaving such odd distinctions open to ambition, would not repress exertion by narrowing the field for competition. Randall and he had always been in competition, and Randall had always proved superior. Had that been in Father's mind when he summoned Dixon and Royle to draft and notarise his will, deed and testament?

"There is," said Hildebrand, "one glimmer of hope."

Alicia stopped sucking her teeth and perked up.

"Do you mean hope of inheritance, Mister Hildebrand?"

"Indeed, I do."

"What is it that we might hope for?"

"Randall, the oldest son, has no issue, has he?"

Alicia nudged Gilbert, as if she were too modest to give a complete answer.

Gilbert said, "None that we know of. None legitimate and baptised."

"That being the case," said Mr Hildebrand, "if- and Lord knows we would not, I'm sure, wish it – but if the oldest brother and nominated heir does not survive long enough to marry and bear issue then, and only then, will you or your surviving heirs come into full and complete possession of the estates of Ottershaw and Balnesmoor."

"Is that the law?" said Alicia.

"That indeed is the law," said Mr Hildebrand. "One would not, of course, wish Mister Randall an early and untimely death."

"Indeed it would be most un-Christian to nurture such a tragic hope," said Alicia piously. "Nevertheless we must acknowledge the fact that Randall is a serving officer at present engaged in the Spanish campaigns and that he must be constantly at risk."

"At risk," said Hildebrand, "and without legitimate issue."

At that moment Gilbert noticed that the bluebottle had struggled to its legs again on the window sill and, with wings buzzing loudly, had risen up the glass. Gilbert did not know whether he was relieved or disappointed that Hildebrand had held out hope. How could he, her husband, tell Alicia that Randall resembled that bluebottle, stubborn and indestructible? He would sound like a fool.

"Mortal man," said Hildebrand, "may be powerless to tamper with the Scottish laws but God, if He chooses, may break or bend the horseshoe at any time."

"Alicia, I –" Gilbert began.

But his wife paid him no heed. She was shaking hands with the lawyer, rewarding him for his help and advice with one of her enigmatic smiles.

What that smile meant precisely Gilbert did not dare imagine.

The sun sank in a welter of blood-red cloud and stretched the shadows of the olive grove out like great velvet fingers towards him. Between the trees, framed in laurel, was the end of a winding river, molten gold in the afterglow. From the horizon came the chanting of ecclesiastics and the slow, solemn tolling of a chapel bell. He seemed to be standing just above the ground, floating motionless in the last rays of that sunset, unable to tear himself away, unable to exert any sort of volition at all.

She came out of the trees in the middle distance, a girl dressed like a peasant but with a sash of white silk about her waist. He had the uneasy feeling that he knew her but he could not put a name to the face nor place her in the scheme of his existence. He saw now that she carried a taper in her cupped hands and, though she was running, that the flame did not waver or go out. She stared straight at him as she approached and her lips parted and her head was thrown back and he felt that she might be crying a warning except that there was no sound in his ears but the chanting and the knell of the chapel bell.

He cried out but made no sound.

Who are you? Tell me your name.

She ran towards him. She came no closer.

Straining every muscle he broke the terrible, sticky inertia and tore himself from the landscape, striving to reach her since it seemed that she would never reach him.

She was an angel bearing the Light of Salvation.

He desired her with a strange pure passion.

From the trees galloped a brigade of French officers. There were twenty or more in the company, magnificently accoutred with full, swaying plumes and tricolours as large as hayfields floating away behind them from the tops of their lances.

The girl was oblivious to the charge and ran as before, without motion, the taper offered out to him. He saw her vividly outlined against the wall of horsemen and he cried out to her again as she had to him; but still there was no sound except the ineffable solemnity of the bell and the rhythmic chanting.

He tried to cover his eyes, to blot out the horror, but he could not even perform that simple action and, paralysed, watched the lances lower and point at her, then bend. He saw her lifted on the tips. She thrashed and screamed and threw up her hands and the taper blossomed into an orb of golden light and floated, light as thistledown, up and up and up into the darkening sky. Involuntarily his eyes followed its soft flight until it vanished into the heavens. When he lowered his gaze again the horsemen had gone and nothing remained but the girl, still now, with her clothing all torn and bloody, and her neck thrawn.

Randall screamed aloud at the terrible loss that smote into his heart, screamed and struggled – and jerked himself suddenly wide awake.

"Bontine, for the Good God's sake!"

Sweat trickled down his face and his neck was rigid. He thudded back against the long bolster as he saw the light again. The light was no figment of his imagination but only a candle held by an aged nun and before it, huge and bloated, was a familiar face thrust close to his own.

"Bontine, do you not recognise me, man?"

Pad of cloth upon his brow wiped away sweat.

"It's Seaton, your old companion."

"Seaton?"

"Aye, who else would bother with a tramp up the hill to call on a scallywag like you?"

"Seaton, I was – I was dreaming."

"It's the fever again."

"No. No, I've been better," Randall declared in a voice that did not encourage credence.

But he had been better. During the hours of daylight he had been remarkably well, without unendurable pain in the leg, only a clawing sort of itch which in its way was worse than the spasms. It was the hours of the night that he found difficult. He was tormented by a strange recurring dream, the dream of a girl to whom he could not put a name. He had spoken of the dream to Mendez, before Mendez had moved on with his Spanish colonel. Mendez, however, was not a doctor of the mind; he had declared the repair of the leg to be successful but had made no promises for its function. "Dreams?" Mendez had said.

"Dreams of women are better for you now, Hussar, than dreams of glory in the field."

Randall had no need to ask the surgeon to explain. He was not so free of pain as to imagine that the leg was as good as new. When he first climbed out of the truckle bed in the bare ante-chamber of the nunnery on the hillside above Vacol, three miles higher than the bivouacs, the limb would not support him. It would not bend to his demand. It splayed out, let him down, pitched him to the floor. The nuns – only two of whom he had encountered, both old – were amused. Their apparent lack of sympathy roused his anger. The women of the cloth were, however, excellent nurses and the food, what he could eat of it, was nourishing. Seaton, he later learned, had arranged the hospital and paid for it out of his own pocket.

Seaton clasped him by the arm and drew him up from the bolster. He was not nearly so weak as he had been and took further strength from the comradely grasp.

"Randall, I am on my way again," said Seaton. "My wound has healed sufficiently and I hear again the skirl of the pipes from over the mountain. We are awa' to hunt Soult's divisions through the sierra."

"I'll – I'll join you in a week or so."

Randall swung himself out of the bed. He wore drawers and a compression band about his stomach but nothing else. The wizened old nun was not shocked, nor did she giggle. She stood quietly in a corner holding the candlestick so that the officers might have light. Upon a chair, Randall's uniform hung empty. It seemed leeched of colour as if it, like his career, had faded rapidly in the wake of his injury.

"There's much talk of your deeds at Almarez, talk coming down from the brigade," Seaton said.

Randall felt no pride. Almarez was over and done with, together with all the battles he had fought in and survived. He had not joined with death, only with pain and injury. The rest seemed hazy and touched with a peculiar boredom. He did not wish to be reminded of it, not by Seaton at any rate.

"When do you leave?" Bontine asked.

"In the dawn light."

"What is the hour now?"

"After ten of the clock."

"In a week," Randall said, "I'll be fit in a week or so."

"Och, man, you'll not be fit for many a month. I spoke with Mendez. You're fortunate to be lofted on two pins at all."

"Give me a horse –"

Seaton shook his head at the vanity of his fellow officer, the irrational belief that he was cut from different stuff from other men.

"Brigadier Coltart is in office at Requena, on the route to the ports of Valencia. There is a regimental establishment there," said Seaton.

"Are you telling me I must report to Coltart?"

"We are away, Randall."

"Aye, I suppose you are, Seaton. I give you thanks for all that you have done for me."

"I have a final gift," said Seaton. "Brandy. French bottled at that. A trophy." He placed the bottle upon the table. "And I have brought you letters from the mail-bags which came up three days ago. You have several missives from Scotland. I envy you your letters from home."

"You envy me nothing else, I'll wager."

Seaton's bluff features softened. "No, nothing else, Bontine."

The men shook hands, Randall still seated on the bed. The final greeting was stilted. The jests and badinage fell flat. The nun watched, her head on one side.

Then Seaton was gone. It was improbable, Randall realised, that their paths would cross again, though he had bid hail and farewell to so many amiable officers in his career that he felt no more than a momentary pang of regret at Seaton's departure. The door closed. The nun remained.

Upon the table, by the brandy bottle, were four packets of mail, eight or nine letters in all. Diffidently Randall stretched out his hand for them. He could not reach.

The nun shuffled to assist but he growled, "No," and held up his fist threateningly. She stopped, the candle-holder extended, bathing the table and the bed with its light.

Randall grimaced, pushed himself upright and, balanced like a rope-walker, tottered to the table. He did not sink on to the chair but held its back, waiting for the stitch of pain to draw out of his thigh. He was bound still, and the linen was clean; no oozing, no poison. What lay beneath the padding was a mess of scarred, knotted flesh with the fatty blisters of the searing-iron still raw. He leaned into the chair and took the brandy bottle into his hand. He drew the cork with his teeth then, the bottle poised, glanced at the nun. She was very old, very wrinkled, winnowed by the years. He wondered how much she understood of the war, if she admired him for fighting for the Spanish cause.

"If you would be so good, Sister, as to set the candle down upon the table, I would be obliged to you," he said softly in her mother tongue.

It wearied him to charm her. He wanted to give her orders, snap at her like an arrogant subaltern. But he might be here for days yet, weeks perhaps, until he could find a method of revitalising the muscles of his leg and fitting himself into a saddle. If he could not march, he would force himself to ride. He would live on horseback, eat and sleep on horseback, would become a Minotaur; or did he mean a Centaur?

The nun put down the holder. The candle was tallow and gave a glabrous light, stinking as the wick spluttered and uncurled. It was long enough, fat enough, however, to provide several hours of reading, though he imagined that he would be bored by Gibbie's trivialities and his father's essays on sheep before a quarter-hour had passed.

"Thank you, Sister," he said.

The old woman bowed and, still without a word, shuffled out of the room and closed the door.

Randall swung the brandy bottle and drank deeply.

It was fiery and quite smooth and he drank again, twice, before setting the bottle back upon the table. He felt better, stronger. He inched his way around the chair and hoisted himself on to the table, letting his legs dangle. He had discovered a certain comfort in that position, with the weight relieved. He moved the candle-holder and the bottle and, with his left hand, spread out the packets beside him. They were sealed and stamped but without legible date.

He picked one packet at random and broke it open.

Three letters.

He picked one of the three and ripped it with his thumbnail, unfolded it and, holding it low to catch the light, began to read the latest, belated news from home.

At home James Simpson Moodie presented the image of a man who straddled the pinnacle of worldly success. In Edinburgh society, certainly in London, Mr Moodie might have been considered a trifle 'rustic'. In county towns where much of his business was conducted, however, and in the marts of that coarse but vital centre of the new commerce, Glasgow, Mr Moodie's conservatism was respected, his no-nonsense style admired.

Marrying a young beauty without pedigree plucked from the fields had done the merchant's reputation no harm. James and Elspeth made a handsome couple. They appeared entirely well suited. She possessed youthful poise to offset his mature stolidity. That he loved her there could be no doubt. If certain cynical gentlemen – Rudge and Scarf, for example – murmured that bouncing with a girl thirty years his junior had certainly benefited James Moodie's health, they did so out of earshot of their employer.

Tales that came from servants at Moss House, chits of girls who fastened on anything they did not understand, were given little credence. After all, many a married couple in spacious circumstances kept separate bedchambers. It was becoming quite the fashion and, it was said, added spice to games of chase-the-goose. It also freed a husband from a clutter of paint pots and ribbons and from tripping over little slippers when he advanced his conjugal rights.

It did not, of course, occur to anyone – not even the all-seeing Tolland – that James Moodie had never bedded his wife, that Elspeth remained as virginal and pure as she had been at the altar step on her wedding day.

Dinner, or supper as it was called when guests were not being entertained, was the final event of the day. Afterwards there might be a half-hour's reading in the library or a hand or two of jaggs or cribbage played between wife and husband by way of fellowship. But Elspeth was expected to be off upstairs by half-past nine at the latest to leave her husband to his accounting or letter-writing or to deciphering the published bills and acts that stemmed from an over-active parliament, all of which seemed, according to James's grumbles, designed to bring wool merchants to ruin.

Ten was a late enough hour for a girl used to beginning work at dawn and being wrapped in her blankets not long after the sun went down, but Elspeth, like her husband, was no sleepy-head. She would prop herself on the bolsters and by the light of an oil lamp or a branch of candles would read far into the night. Most nights she would still be awake when James came upstairs. She would listen to his tread upon the boards of the landing, listen with hope and anxiety, her face turned towards the unlocked door. But the footsteps did not falter. She would hear his door open and unhesitatingly close and, night after niggling night, be left to wonder what she had done or not done to turn him against her in that way. Why did he not want her?

There was, however, an undercurrent of relief in her bewilderment. She had no more desire for James than he for her. Her feelings for Michael had forced her to recognise the truth, that she was locked into a marriage in which desire had no part.

Dinner that particular night was as lavish as always. James set a full table. The board groaned with dishes to suit his taste; plain fare but an excess of it, as if it gave him satisfaction to survey dishes of meat and tureens of soup, cheeses and fillets of smoked fish, comfits, cream puddings and imported fruits ranged all about. When master and mistress had had their fill the rest was taken off by the serving-girls. What would not keep was scoffed by the domestics or handed out to gardeners and stable-men in the morning. Mr Moodie might be shrewd and hard in business dealings but he was not, in small things, mean.

Little was said during the course of the meal and when it was over James ordered coffee to be served in the library. A bright fire had been lighted in the grate and four or five posies of garden flowers, selected by Elspeth that afternoon, adorned the mantelshelf and heavy furniture. James poured coffee from a plain, octagonal pot of solid silver which he had purchased along with other valuable pieces from a dealer in Perth. To be sociable, Elspeth accepted a little cup, laced with fresh cream and sugar. She was alert for a pause in James's desultory complaints against manufacturers in Yorkshire's West Riding who had again permitted their workers to rise up in demand for a minimum wage and to demolish valuable property, including a couple of gig mills.

"Twenty minutes," James said, "and the foul work of musterin', destruction and dispersal was over."

"Aye, dear, I read of it," said Elspeth.

"Luddites, they call themselves." James shook his head.

"Give rioters a name an' you dignify their mutinous causes. God, but hangin's too good for them."

"Are you worried it'll happen at Kennart?"

James hesitated. "There will be no riots here. For some reason, for which we may be thankful, the folk of the Lennox have no fear of marchin' on with progress."

"Perhaps they haven't learned yet," Elspeth said.

"Aye, well, the labourin' class is always slow to learn anything." James rested his shoulder against a corner of the mantelshelf. "I regard the Yorkshire louts as wretched and deluded. I could almost pity them, near enough, if it was not for their barbarity an' the ravages of disorder which they equate with the expression of grievances. I wish they were sensible enough to realise that what benefits the masters equally benefits them. Investors of capital are not their enemies. Would they prefer to be cast out into the cold, wet fields again to scrounge ha'pence howin' cabbages and toppin' neeps?"

Elspeth gave him no answer. It had occurred to her, though, that the building of mills and similar manufactories was of itself a dangerous thing. Out in open rows and cold rigs, there was no congregation, no concentration of discontents; men and women suffered more stoically in small communities. She had, however, not explored this line of thought, certainly not enough to challenge her husband in discussion. James's question had been rhetorical in any case.

Elspeth wondered when she should bring up the matter of the loan to Matt Sinclair, how she could best introduce the subject. To her surprise, James gave her a lead.

"What did your sister want?"

Tolland, of course, had informed James that Anna had been to call at Moss House.

"She came t' request a favour."

"What would that be?" said James.

He was studying her with odd intensity, the little coffee-cup lost in his hand. He had put the saucer on the shelf by the flower bowl.

"She wondered if we – if you – would be prepared to lend Matt money," said Elspeth.

"On what security?"

"I don't know if there is any security."

"What answer did you give your sister?"

James seemed angry; not in the manner she would have anticipated. It was as if he were angry at her.

Elspeth said, "I told her you'd not make a loan without a security."

"Do you want me to give money to this man?"

"It's of no great importance to me, James."

"But you have – feelin's for him?"

"He's my sister's husband."

"His father's grieve of Ottershaw and no pauper. If there's an urgent requirement for cash, why does the lad not ask his father?"

"He wishes to leave Ottershaw, to strike out on his own."

"Doin' what, by way of profession?" said James with something close to a sneer. "Sellin' withy baskets to auld wives?"

"A steadin'," said Elspeth. "A smallholdin' of his own is the objective."

"Where you would be free to visit?" said James.

It did not dawn on Elspeth what troubled her husband. She had no tie, except the fact he was married to her sister, to Matt Sinclair. Her fancy for him had long ago vanished; a childish affectation, no more.

"I'd hardly be likely to visit at all if they settle out of the Lennox," Elspeth answered. "Matt wants away from Ottershaw, to be his own man."

"He told you so? He spoke with you intimately of his plans?"

"I knew nothin' of it until this afternoon when Anna called."

"Yet you informed her there would be no loan from me. Why did you do that, Elspeth?" said James.

"Because I –"

James put the coffee-cup into the saucer, came to a short-legged satin chair and seated himself upon it, leaning his fists on his knees.

"Do you not think he should leave Balnesmoor?" said James. It was hardly a question at all.

"Anna's keen to be away."

"Oh, so it's Anna who must carry the blame."

"Blame? Who must carry blame for –"

"Why does your sister want away from here?"

"I don't know, James. I assume she's tired of Ottershaw."

"Sinclair's no farmer, you know."

"I told her so."

"Wiser and better men than him have foundered on a smallholdin'," said James Moodie. "How much does he ask for?"

"Twenty pounds," Elspeth answered, "to purchase stock an' farm furniture."

"Twenty pounds, indeed! God, when I was his age it took me a six month crouched over the loom to make that sort of sum; aye, and precious little of it was profit. It seems these days that the young have no patience." James reached between his knees and dragged the chair forward. "So – twenty pounds is Sinclair's price, is it?"

"It's as much as you care to lend him."

"It's ten times what I'd care to lend him."

"Very well, James," the young woman said. "I'll inform Anna to that effect."

"Unless you insist, I'll give him nothing."

"I'm only a messenger." Elspeth was confused. "Anna would have come to you but she holds you in awe."

James snorted. "Why did Sinclair himself not come to see me?"

"Because I'm Anna's sister."

"Could he not meet my eye?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Could he not face me?"

"He hardly knows you, James."

"He knows you better, does he?"

"We attended school together. We're of an age."

James got to his feet. "If I give Sinclair a loan of twenty pounds, will he clear out an' leave Balnesmoor for good?"

"That seems to be his intention."

"If I do this, you'll not see him again?"

"It's unlikely, unless Anna needs me."

"Unless *Anna* needs you?"

"If she falls ill or, perhaps, if she has a confinement, and I'm obliged to be with her, then I would ask your permission –"

"Is she with child?"

"She says not."

"You, by some chance are not –" James did not complete the question, sensed that it was excessively vindictive and unjustified.

"How can I be with child, since you've not seen fit to consummate our vows?" Elspeth snapped.

"It was an ill-considered, ill-timed remark," muttered James. "I was thinkin' of your sister, not you."

"I'm your wife, James, the kind of wife you elect to make of me."

"Is it so hard?"

"Sometimes it is hard."

James returned to the fire and retrieved his coffee-cup and saucer. He fussed with the silver pot, his back to his wife who, however, did not lapse into her seat again.

Part of her shrank from pursuing the question of her unnatural marriage; another part of her longed to bring it into the open. James made her so comfortable, though, treated her with such affection that she could find no small stick with which to beat him. How could she tell him that she needed to be loved as a man loves a woman? She had come to him, come to Moss House to join in a mercenary union, to give him pleasure and access to her body in exchange for the security that his wealth promised in abundance. He had cheated her of that, had somehow made it all seem dishonest by ignoring her femininity. And, she realised, she was lonely.

James turned, forced a smile, cocked his head. "I'll talk to young Sinclair. I'll give him a chance to put his case."

"Don't talk to him," said Elspeth. "Please don't bother."

Suspicion again. "Why should I not, since it's Sinclair who'll have my money, if I choose to give it?"

"Let me tell Anna you have refused. I warned her you might. Let the matter remain as it is."

"Why did you ask me at all, in that case?"

"I don't know. I wish I'd never raised the subject."

"Leave it to me, my dear," James said. "I'll disentangle the fankle you seem to have got yourself into."

He was humouring her now, patronising her. Oh, yes, James would defend her against every offence – except his own incomprehensible reluctance to treat her like a grown woman.

Though a carriage clock stood on the table in plain view. James drew his watch from his pocket and consulted it ostentatiously.

"Ah!" he said. "I see it's growin' late. Off upstairs with you, dear."

"And what of you?"

"I have work to do," James said.

She gathered her skirts and turned from him.

"Elspeth?"

"What?"

"Have you not forgotten somethin'?"

"What?"

"My kiss."

He offered his cheek.

She kissed him brusquely and obediently then left him alone in the library to ascend, alone, to her bed.

James had come up and gone into his room and closed the door. She had not stirred at the sound of his footfall on the stairs. It was warm in the bedroom. The casement was open. Lace curtains wafted in the balmy night air which drifted off the hillside and carried the sharp little sounds of the moor into the silent house. She had been reading the latest novel to arrive from Menzies' Circulating Library, an innovatory scheme which James had paid fee to join. *The Italian*, a later work by Mrs Radcliffe, had gripped Elspeth at first. It seemed so in tune with her audacious daydreams that she could not lay it down. But her eyes had grown tired in the candlelight and the thread of the story had become confused. She had put the volume aside, her mind tumbling with thoughts far removed from the pilgrims and *banditti* of Italy's Inquisition.

She wore the lightest of shifts. In it she felt weightless as she slipped from the four-poster. When she confronted her image in the cheval-glass, with the glow of the candles behind her, she seemed to have no substance at all. Tentatively she cupped her breasts, feeling the nipples stiffen instantly under the thin silk. She was taken by a longing to strip off the garment and fling herself nude upon the bed. Breathlessly she hurried to the window.

The first of the harvest moons silvered the evergreens and cast fat shadows over the lawn. The drystone walls which slithered over the pastures were sharply outlined and the great humped shapes of Drumglass and Dumgoyne showed every crag and cranny in coal-black silhouette. Elspeth sighed and stretched out her arms as if to embrace the hills and the moorland. Cool air soothed the throbbing in her body, reduced the errant and unfamiliar need. Out on the Orrals a vixen cried hauntingly and a colt in the stables near at hand snickered; then all was still and silver once more.

If he had not wished it she would not have seen him. He was well hidden by the bole of a sycamore, close enough to look up into her bedroom, close enough to admire her by the back-light of the candle within the chamber. He had no hesitation in showing himself.

"Michael?" she said.

His sway-brimmed hat was as old as sin and he wore a greatcoat loose about his thin shoulders like a cloak. He behaved without a trace of embarrassment and with jocular candour swept off the hat and delivered a bow so deep that his brow almost touched the grass.

She felt a huge surge of joy at the sight of him, relief in the knowledge that she had not lost him or that he had not abandoned her. It gave a sharp edge to his declaration of love. She knew that he had not come to spy upon her but only to be close. She wanted so badly to call down on him, to tempt him upstairs by the servants' corridor, to bring him to her here in her bedroom. She felt no remorse and no shame in allowing him to look at her figure. How it would have ended was a mystery which had no solution. At that moment a light gleamed in the window of James's room and dappled the broad stone ledge of the corner. It was too obvious, too threatening a sign to ignore.

Michael vanished as if he had been consumed by the sycamore tree. She felt cheated, robbed of the moment and its infinite possibilities. She would not be driven by James from the open window and lingered there for fully ten minutes. But Michael had gone, had slipped away into the darkness and would, even now, be skirting the edge of the moor on his way home to Preaching Friar.

How many nights had he visited the garden in the hope of seeing her? Perhaps being close was reward enough. Had James seen him? She doubted it. There would have been a hue and cry for sure; ruffians had been abroad in Balfron and Killearn, thieves and housebreakers. Michael was a stranger to her husband, would always be a stranger to James Moodie.

She was comforted by the knowledge that he came to her in the night, that he had not held it against her that she had rejected him that day upon the Orrals, almost two months ago, and had not ventured one step upon the moor since then. She was disturbed, however, by the fact that her need of him had not diminished in the intervening weeks, but had grown stronger, had become desperate and undeniable. He seemed to be everywhere around her, as if the moor itself reached out to caress her. By her side, only a few feet away, the lamplight in James's window receded. She was once more alone. She waited, trembling and breathless, for Michael to return, her heart breaking with her longing for him.

After a time she was driven from the casement to the bed. She sank down upon it, yielding and solitary, and let the breeze from the moor brush her limbs and stroke her body. She could not resist now. How long could she resist Michael? There was no answer, only her own little moaning cry, and out upon the moorland the whimper of the vixen like a child afraid of the dark.

It had come as a fearful shock to Alicia when the letter from Harwich had reached Gilbert's hand. Randall was back in England. Randall had been discharged of his commission, honourably it seemed. Randall would be banging his fist on the table in two or three weeks' time. Randall had no intention of relinquishing his estate or his title to anyone, least of all to Gibbie. Randall wanted Ottershaw's rent books and income, not to mention the mansion, all for himself. He advised Gibbie, in straightforward terms, to begin a search for a suitable domicile for himself and his family. Randall even had the gall to suggest that Gilbert might prefer to reside in Ireland, to put down roots on a small agricultural estate near Uncle Alexander's in the ring of Kerry. Gilbert was not well pleased and Alicia was black affronted.

"Am I to be turned out of my house like a gypsy from a field, left on a cart in the rain with my poor children starving and shivering around me?" she had cried.

"Come now, Alicia, Randall has given us six months to find a suitable dwelling. Villain he may be but he won't have us bodily thrown out."

"I would believe anything of that person," Alicia had gone on. "I always took him for a man of some honour, a soldier who would put commission and country before personal benefit and gain."

Gilbert had nodded. "Indeed, it's strange that he seems eager to return. He's never cared a jot for Ottershaw. Why, suddenly, should he embrace it?"

"To spite us."

"Have you heard no more from Hildebrand concernin' the deed?"

"It appears that nothing is to be done about it."

"Oh!" Gilbert was not unduly surprised.

"But what, I want to know, is to be done about Randall?"

"Perhaps," Gilbert had said lamely, "Randall will change his view after he comes home. Ottershaw hardly seems the sort of place for an active and adventurous fellow. Perhaps he will see the folly of trying to be a laird, will accept a sum of money in lieu, and go his own way to perdition."

With such fond optimism Alicia had to be content, and bide her time until Major Bontine severed himself from the ties of his King's Commission and steered north across the Scottish border again.

In the villages, word spread quickly: Mister Randall's going to become the new laird after all. Mister Gibbie's flung out on his lug, lock, stock and biscuits. Wild rumours stimulated the conversation of tenants and servants, giving rise to excuse for heavy drinking among men who obscurely felt that their security was threatened by the return of the military enigma.

On the Sabbath morning, Reverend Eshner offered a prayer for the laird's safe return and, in the family pew, Alicia Bontine screwed her face into a mask of fury and glowered from under the knob of her bonnet at the minister who, being one of those who prayed with his eyes closed, did not notice the lady's ire. In his secret howff up on the moor, Pad Tomelty offered a toast to Major Randall for the increase in the local consumption of whisky; but nobody knew who it was who had leaked the news of the laird's return. It could hardly be Hunter, Tolland's equivalent at Ottershaw, for Hunter, like a true-born steward, was the soul of discretion. It could not be Lachlan Sinclair for he had told nobody except his dear and trustworthy wife, Aileen; and Aileen had told nobody except her son, Matt, who had in fact come to her for the express purpose of having the rumour confirmed. Matt, in due course, told Anna and Anna flew into a panic.

Matt, however, had no time to spare to placate his silly wife whose moods and fancies struck him as childish, not the sort of things a man should be bothering himself with, not when there was money to be made now the cereal crops were in and Pad Tomelty's pot stills were steaming night and day. What Matt did not tell his wife was that he had been approached by no less a personage than James Moodie and that the damned weaver had tried to bribe him to leave Ottershaw.

Moodie had caught him coming out of the back of the Ramshead inn, behind the pig mews, late on a Wednesday night. Dressed in black he merged into the shadows about an hour or so after the sun had gone down. Matt had had a dram or two from the contents of the kegs which he had spent the afternoon cargo-ing down the hillside, instead of clearing out a coppice of old beech trees as he should have been doing. How Moodie had got himself into hiding, for the Ramshead was all eyes and ears, Matt could not imagine. It gave him a shake, though, to be called to out of the mews.

"Sinclair."

"Who's there?"

"Calm yourself. I'm no Exciseman."

Weaver Moodie showed himself. He had his hands in the pockets of his coat and the collar turned up as if it were already chill winter and not a mellow September evening.

Matt said, "What are you doin' in such a place as this?"

"I wish words with you, Sinclair."

"Could ye not have sent one o' your messengers, since it's private discussion ye seem t' require?"

"It's private enough here," said Moodie.

"How did ye know I'd be –"

The question died on Matt's lips. So, also, did his urgency to be away up the fork road by Dyers' Dyke to return the cart and pony to the shed by McDonald's cottage.

There was noise from within the inn, the scrape of a fiddle and three merry songsters trying to adhere on the melody of *Fare Thee Well, My Dame*. There was light too from the windows, enough to show Matt the heavy leather purse that Moodie had removed from his pocket and held up, chinking, in his fingers.

"Fifty guineas," said James Moodie. "Guineas of the good, old-fashioned, solid sort."

"Aye, I've seen guineas before, Mister Moodie."

"But have you ever owned one," said Moodie, "let alone fifty?"

"What is this?"

"The loan you requested through the intercession of your wife," James said. "Fifty, not twenty."

"On what terms is it given?"

"When you have settled an' turned the ground to profit, you may repay me as you can."

"It might be years an' years."

"I'm aware of that fact. Nonetheless, here is the cash you asked for." James Moodie gave the purse a little, almost impatient shake.

Matt did not reach out for it. He was suspicious and arrogant. "Is there no condition?"

"I informed you that there was no condition. The loan is to aid you in findin' a steadin' of your own, for the stock and the furnishings," said Moodie. "Take it."

"Strikin' out on my own is an easy thing to talk about, more difficult to accomplish," said Matt.

"Damn me!" Moodie snapped. "Am I to dangle this purse before you all night?"

"What if I take the money to put to other purposes? What if I repay you, with accumulation of interest, in – say – a six month?"

"The money is for a farm. Ground," said Moodie. "In fact, I have enquired about a vacant rent of sixty acres –"

"Where?"

"Cromarty."

"Cromarty!" Matt exclaimed. "Why in God's name would I be wantin' to make a home in Cromarty? It's a thousand miles away."

"Hardly so far," said Moodie. "It is, however, a sweet parcel of ground with a sound cottage upon it, so I have heard on good authority."

"What if I don't want to go to far-off Cromarty, but prefer to find a steadin' of my own elsewhere?"

"I'll hold the fifty guineas until you do."

"Are ye bribin' me to leave the Lennox, by any chance?"

"I was led to believe it was your wish to leave here."

"Ye were led to believe incorrectly," said Matt.

"Do you not want my money?"

"I'll take your money, certainly," said Matt, stretching out his hand for the purse.

"And leave Balnesmoor?"

"Nah, nah!" Matt shook his head. "I'll not be told by you or anybody how I must direct my life, Weaver Moodie."

James Moodie's fist swallowed the leather purse but he held his hand raised so that the bag might reappear at any moment. "You may never have such an opportunity again, Sinclair."

"I may have better," said Matt with a smirk.

"Running whisky for Tomelty?"

"I canna understand why ye have this interest in my welfare, on a sudden," Matt said. "Pitchin' guineas at me. Pryin' into my business."

"I have been reminded," said James Moodie, "that you are a relation, albeit by tenuous connection. I feel I have a responsibility to you, Sinclair."

Matt made an unflattering sound with his lips.

"I need no man to look out for me or mine," he declared. "If you'd made this offer – aye, and it's a generous offer I'll admit – three months ago I might have taken it an' gone. I have somethin' to hold me here now. I'm not givin' it up, Weaver Moodie."

"I see," said James Moodie, "that you are naught but a stubborn fool." The fist with the purse in it returned to James's pocket.

"Why do you want rid o' me?" said Matt.

"I think you know the answer."

Matt stuck his tongue into his cheek. "Perhaps I do. Perhaps I do not," he said, endeavouring to cover bewilderment with youthful bravado. "But I'm not goin'."

"Then you may rue it," said James.

From the side door of the inn a knot of Moodie's mill-hands spilled on to the cobbles of the yard, shouting and cursing jovially. Moodie's name was on their lips, slurred and slanderous. If they had known that the weaver was within earshot they would have sobered immediately with the shock of it. But James Moodie had no ears for the jolly insults and ribaldry.

"I saw you upon the moor, Sinclair," he hissed.

“Aye, then you know,” Matt stated.

The young man and the weaver were close together and either would relent.

“If you stop now,” said Moodie, “I’ll say no more about t.”

“What if I do not?”

“I’ll be your enemy.”

“Hoh!” said Matt, shrugging.

James Moodie broke off the conversation. There was no more to be said, no further appeal to be made to Matt Sinclair.

Matt felt a warm suffusion of triumph as if, somehow, he had bested the well-to-do weaver in a contest of wills. He was empted to brag of it to McDonald an hour later when the woodman came out of the cottage to see the cart and the pack nimal safe home. Prudence stayed Matt then and slyness tayed him later when he had returned to Pine Cottage to find Anna in her usual guddle of pots and platters.

Aye, if he could have gone without Anna to Moodie’s promised croft in distant Cromarty, if Moodie had offered to ake her off his hands, perhaps he would have been more sorely empted. He found that he had no desire to talk with his wife, o tell her that her plea to Elspeth had been well made and had borne fruit. He had no energy left that night for argument and quarrel. He knew that Anna was keener than he was to get out of Ottershaw and far away from Balnesmoor. Matt did not associate it with the laird’s return, with Randall Bontine, the illustrious, mysterious eldest son of the man who had owned him since the day he’d been born.

Saying nothing of his work that day, or of the strange encounter with James Moodie, Matt greeted Jacko lovingly and with the monkey perched on his shoulder sat down in good humour to eat.

FOUR

Citizens All

High tide at Broomielaw, combined with a sudden sharp drop in temperature, brought October mist oozing from the river into the heart of Glasgow. Redolent of salt and brew-wash, fish and horse-manure, the mist browned like gravy as it poured across the meadow flats and over the roofs of the villas that flanked Queen Street and elegant Exchange Square. Although it was not yet the rasping winter fog which would prowl the town for weeks on end and draw its rope through the lungs of many a citizen, the mist could hardly be classed as mellow. Certainly it had bite enough, come seven o'clock, to bring a wheeze to the chest of sturdy Trina Cunningham.

Big-boned and fleshy, Mistress Cunningham seemed far too robust to suffer from a delicate chest yet her health was sufficiently suspect to require her to nip frequently from the flask of gin which her 'husband' George had brought along with the rest of the truck from their lodgings behind the stables of the Lord of the Isles. It also necessitated an extra layer of shawls about her enormous shoulders, a blanket tucked around her enormous legs and a deal of concerned fussing from George in intervals of business at the hand-cart.

It being a Tuesday and the bill at the Queens being an interim company without a decent comedian or an exciting play to carry it, custom at the stalls along the south side of the street was hardly brisk. Trina was not much troubled by having to replenish the crusty pies or soused herring or the russets or green marble pears on the trays. Hot pease pudding or sweet chestnuts roasting on a glowing brazier would suit the change in the weather and a change in venue might have found more customers. But the farthing crowd no longer appealed to the Cunninghams who, having defied constables and the theatre's bully-boys for the privilege of setting up pposite the pillared frontage of the Queens, intended to stay here through thick and thin.

In addition to the Cunninghams' cart, the pavement gave pace to flower and confectionery stalls, to trays of combs, pins nd handkerchiefs and an antlered rack of gloves attended by a sedate 'lady' recently abandoned by a caddish earl. Riff-raff nd beggars were deterred from invading the pitch in theatre treet, chased away by George and several other fellows who ttended the women there. Queen Street was too remunerative o queer with undesirables.

In the ten months that the Cunninghams had occupied the tance they had reaped a handsome reward for their enterprise. Indeed they had money to spare and George had even opened a modest account at the Ship Bank, which was a rare thing for street people to do. Living had become easy for the Cunninghams. Trina had regular doses of gin to keep her tubes 'liquidated' and George now bought his tobacco in pigtails. For all that, the Cunninghams were not content. They found that they had precious little time to savour the fruits of their labours. Traipsing round the food markets in search of cheap cuts and cheaper fruits, lugging purchases back to the stable building for Trina to garnish, hand-carting the stuff to Queen Street – all consumed much time, in addition to the long cold hours of attendance on the stall.

There were occasions when George and Trina wondered if it was worth the effort or if they would have been happier as they had been before, tagging the city fairs for a shilling or two, and living idle on the knuckle.

On that particular Tuesday, with winter barking in the mist and the pavement chill upon the toes, George and Trina were bored and disgruntled and ready for challenge, for the opportunities that chance was about to throw their way.

It was some four or five minutes after curtain-rise and those citizens who had ventured out to see a nobody named Parish perform the role of Captain Absolute had cleared the foyer. Only a few well-to-do patrons would roll up to the columns now and the stall-owners would either move off to other corners or while away the slack period by chatting and taking a bite of supper.

The late-comers did not come in a carriage. Walking, they appeared suddenly around the street's south corner. There were two ladies, a female servant and a muscular young footman. George and Trina were able to tell at a glance from which strata of society the ladies had sprung.

Taking the pipe from his mouth, George muttered, "Trade money."

The footman had no buckles on his shoes and the maid was plain stuff too, though the ladies both wore opulent gowns which rustled under fur-trimmed mantles. Obviously they had not come far, possibly from one of the new villas in Ingram Street.

It was the elder of the ladies who called out in a vulgar voice, "Marzipans. I really must have marzipans. Thomas, see what's on the trays, lad."

The women followed Thomas the footman towards the stalls.

"Apples look choice, m'm," Thomas said.

"Fresh from Lanark this very morn," confided George. "Pears too, drippin' with juice. Four fruits for tuppence."

"No, I want marzipans." She turned to her young companion. "Elspeth, my pet, what catches your fancy?"

The young woman, hardly more than a girl, approached the Cunninghams' cart and studied the trays by the light of the lantern which George obligingly tipped forward on its pole.

At that instant Trina Cunningham rose from her stool like a hot-air balloon, crying, "Good God, it's Bell Harper!"

Frowning, George glanced at his distraught wife and lost touch with the customers who, steered by the old lady, had gone down to the sweetmeat tray and were buying papers of marzipan in preference to fruit. The group swung towards the theatre and were on the edge of the coping before Trina found voice.

"You, lady. You, come back," she cried.

Thomas squared his shoulders and prepared to protect his mistress and her guest from harassment.

"Take an apple, lady. It costs nothin'. It's a gift for somebody pretty," Trina called, offering a pippin in her big fist.

Thomas would have relieved the stall-owner of the apple but Trina would have none of it. "Let her come an' take it hersel'."

And the young woman returned, hesitantly, into the puddle of lantern light.

"It is you. Bell, how can it be you?" Trina leaned her astonished bosom upon the trays and stared at the girl as if she were a ghost.

The footman gruffly put an arm about the girl's shoulder and steered her away from the half-daft fat wifie with her offer of apples and her air of derangement. Slumped on the trays Trina stared round-eyed until the young woman disappeared into the theatre.

"What is it, dear one?" George asked anxiously.

He placed a hand on his wife's shoulder. In response she twined her arms about his waist and laid her head on his stomach. She was shivering. George feared that she had contracted a fever. When she rolled her eyes to his, however, he saw that she had been stunned by an amazement. Bending, so that the nosey stall-holders on either side could not hear, he asked again what was wrong.

"Lord, Lord!" Trina answered. "I believe I just seen a ghost."

"A ghost?"

"Aye, her. The young 'un."

"She looked solid enough t' me," said George.

Trina shook herself free. "What age would ye say she was, yon lady?"

Humouring his wife, George shrugged. "About twenty, I'd hazard a guess. Twenty at the most."

"I worked by her in the wash-tubs o' the Tontine Full twenty years ago."

"Impossible," said George. "Trina, you're mistook."

"It's her, I tell you. It's her. No mistake."

"Who is she, then?"

"Bell Harper. Forty if she's a day."

"Forty? She's never forty. Nah, nah!" said George. "Besides, yon's a lady. She never tramped suds in her life."

"Georgie, I tell you it's the self-same lass."

George relieved his wife of the gin flask and, uncapping it, sipped a mouthful of the reviving liquor.

Trina sank down upon the stool once more. She stared at the frontage of the Queens as if the solution to the mystery was being played out on the stage within. She too realised that the fine-dressed lady, with a maid-servant and a footman in her entourage, could hardly be the poor bedraggled slattern she had been acquainted with two decades ago. Memories stirred in her mind. She grunted again, nodded again, as explanations occurred to her.

"Her daughter, then," she declared.

Bewilderment left George Cunningham's features, replaced by a slanting slyness.

"She had a daughter, this washer-lass?" he asked.

"She'd a pie in the oven, last I saw."

"An' a husband?" said George.

"No husband, only a courter."

"What happened t' this Bell Harper lassie?"

"Flung out," said Trina, as if the answer should have been obvious.

"Where did she go?"

Trina Cunningham shook her head. "Can't say."

"To find the courter, the father o' her bairn, perhaps?" George suggested. "Or back to the bosom o' her family?"

Balanced against the woman's knees, he passed her the flask and watched her drink as if gin might ignite memories and illuminate the dark corners of the past.

"She had no family. She came t' the Tontine orphaned."

"To find the man, then," George stated. "The daddy."

"I wonder," said Trina, "where she bides now."

"If that lass *is* her begotten daughter then your Bell Harper bides in a mansion house an' eats her dinner off silver plate."

"It's her daughter," said Trina, flatly. "I just know it."

George Cunningham wriggled closer, an elbow across his wife's lap, his mouth only an inch from her ear.

"Who," he whispered, "might the daddy be, eh?"

"I saw him," said Trina, "three or four times, at the backs o' the tavern, waitin' for her. Handsome he was, if small built."

"Wealthy?"

"Ragged poor," said Trina. "A country lad, a weaver."

"His name, his name? Can ye recall his name, dearest?"

Chapping her knuckles on her forehead as if to shake down facts like walnuts from a stunted tree, Trina pondered.

"I canna. It's forgot, plain forgot," she said, at length.

"Never heed," said George. "Maybe it'll come back to ye."

"It's her, though, Georgie. I'm not mistook on that score."

"I'll take your word on it, Trina, 'til it's otherwise proven."

George Cunningham got up and with his hand on the woman's shoulder, as if posing for a formal portrait, joined her in staring across the road to the Queens. He had no need to explain himself to his woman. They were of like mind and like intention. Both were stimulated by the coincidence and alive to its possibilities.

"First step?" said George.

"Follow her home," said Trina.

Mortifications administered by the management committees of the sundry Incorporations and Guilds of the City of Glasgow were invariably bequeathed to assist the poor and needy. Charity had become as much a mark of prosperity as the erection of a new mansion in the deep green fields beyond the Kelvin. Custodians of these charitable trusts were invariably dignified men, upright as steeples. John McCracken, nine years deceased, had been a fellow of different stamp. Canny in business as a woollen draper, in private he had been a ranting, hard-drinking, rubicund reprobate who had formalised his vices by founding a society – the Stocking Club – of like-minded bon vivants who met fortnightly in the Buck Head Hotel in Argyle Street.

The current Chairman of the Stocking Club, son of the founder, administered the interest on the sum that old Johnny had left and, having regard to the wit and wisdom of the father of the feast, blew it annually on a rip-roaring dinner for drapers, hosiers and their friends who were in serious need of 'cheering up'.

It was as the guest of draper John McCracken that James Moodie found himself at the top table in the Buck Head Hotel, involved in a round of healths and merry toasts. James had no particular fondness for revelry and nurtured a definite dislike of crowds. But he had refused McCracken's invitation year upon year, on some excuse or another, and now felt that it would be churlish, not to say bad for trading relations, to refuse yet again. Besides, McCracken had generously invited James and his good lady wife to spend a day or two in the city, lodged in considerable comfort in the McCrackens' new town house in Ingram Street.

James was apprehensive about leaving Elspeth alone in Balnesmoor. He had sense enough to realise that he might in part be at fault for prompting her to find companionship in secret assignations. When he put the matter of a jaunt to Glasgow to her, Elspeth showed immediate enthusiasm and, thereafter, the arrangements fell snugly into place. Shopping and a visit to the play would be Elspeth's entertainments. She would be escorted by Nettie McCracken while James attended the Stocking Club dinner with John the draper and went to the Trade House on the following afternoon, to listen to a debate on laws relative to the imposition of tax on foreign wool imports. Elspeth, and simple chaps like McCracken, might imagine that James visited Glasgow to have sport but, as always, James's brain was ticking like a clock. Even in the rumbustious atmosphere of the Buck Head, surrounded by wholesalers and retailers of woollen goods, James could not relax the fretful tension which had become dominant in his character and from which, even now, there seemed to be no release.

James, of course, had made sure that the clutch of drapers with whom he had once done tuppenny business as a handloom weaver were either dead or so dwindled that they could not afford the Stocking Club's subscription. He had a fear that some low-grade customer, kept in bond for twenty years or so, would surge out of the company, point a finger at him and heap scorn upon him for his humble origins. The vast majority of drapers and hosiers in the room had also started small, had pulled and tugged at opportunity to drag themselves from hovels and reeking vennels into respectable prosperity; yet none knew Moodie, none had had acquaintance with the pious kirk elder of the past. Even so, James did not feel comfortable in Glasgow. It was here, not a mile from the Buck Head, that he had yielded to the temptations of the flesh. His sin was that of the town itself, an ugly and expanding entity, most fierce and frightful in its offerings. He could not forget it.

Though whisky flowed like water, wines and brandy too, James drank only enough not to seem stand-offish. He ate the viands and grilled salmon and a whole sweet tart, however, to have something to do and to absorb the alcohol in his stomach which countless comical toasts had put there, sip by sip.

By midnight James was the only sober man in the long, low-beamed room. Even he had a thickness in the head and a faint, annoying buzz in his ears. But the members of the Stocking Club, most of whom were indefatigable, were ranting loud as ever, led by one puce-complexioned draper or another through choruses of the old ribald songs, or treated to speeches and impromptu renderings of poems from swaying orators who climbed unasked upon the tables. The maids, James noticed, were still hard at work; not a rosy cheek among them, only drained-white exhaustion, as they hurried from tap-room and cellars with more bottles and jugs and tried, as best they could, to clear the plates away before breakage forced the Buck Head into bankruptcy.

The weaver reclined, head against the panelling, feet on a stool, and studied the poor enslaved girls and their tap-room masters. He was not temperamentally inclined to enjoy herd-pleasure; the omission weighed upon him further. McCracken, his host, had hopped away from the top table and was lost in a gaggle of younger men about the fireplace. Forty lost souls, James thought darkly, seemed to have swelled to a hundred or more. The formality with which the dinner had commenced had long ago vanished. He would have slipped away, gone back to bed in McCracken's house, except that he had seen the four-poster there and knew that Elspeth would be in it.

Rising, James pushed himself from behind the table and clambered over the legs of two fat drapers who, with arms about each other's shoulders, were crooning a weepy dirge about Fair Chloe and the Thorn. It would be an hour or two yet before the evening's celebrations ended and the drunken gang rolled into the night to find their carriages and wend away home for a few hours' slumber.

"Jamie, Jamie, whaur d'ye go?" McCracken sang out.

James did not have to reply. Vulgar suggestions came from several parts of the room. James grinned unconvincingly, waved at the Chairman and acknowledged the hoots of the company as he weaved between the tables to the kitchen exit as if heading for the earth closets at the rear of the carriage yard. He paused at the end of the short passage, however, to glance into the room where lassies in sodden smocks were sluicing mugs, glasses and bottles in wooden tubs as if it were a morning hour. They laboured in a wet and oily haze, barefoot and bare-legged, hair straggled into rats'-tails, skirts tied up. They paid him no need at all; the bold and buxom ones had, perhaps, already been beckoned away to earn a few extra pence in the darkness of the backs. If he wanted a woman, he could find one out there. He might have her without preliminary or aftermath for the price of a mug of ale or a loaf of bread. He pushed into the air and crossed the cobbled yard where a handful of carriage servants lurked. He went out by a lane to growing-ground by the hotel's west gable. An oppression of the spirit weighed heavily upon him.

Trees in autumn drapery; beyond them was the wall of a new dwelling, chimneys and slates, a perfectly square window lit by a candle. James caught the whiff of the mist, not dry now but pearled with moisture, redolent of damp vegetation. Off to his left he glimpsed movement, heard a woman's laughter, the curse in a man's voice. He hurried on under tree boughs to the place where the lane ended, as furtive as any of the nocturnal lovers, as much in need of solitude as they were of coupling.

Stopping – he could go no further – he leaned against the trunk of a little beech which clung to the mud in the corner like an urchin in search of shelter. His head ached. He put his hand to his face and kneaded his fingers into the flesh. The dark corner reminded him of the backs of the Tontine, transported him through twenty-two years. Isobel Harper had slaved like one of the tub-girls in the Buck Head. But he had not been a client of the tavern, had not had money to 'buy' her, to take her once and put her out of his thoughts for ever. He had defiled her with selfishness. He had believed himself to be 'in love' with her, while despising her for her low caste, despising himself for wanting her so. The shy touch of her breasts, her retracting loins, his own heavy demanding flesh; what pleasure was there in such an experience? How could he ever separate it from the vision of her under the tree boughs in the half-light where she waited, dotingly, on his instruction? Five times he had walked from Balnesmoor to Glasgow holding that sere, sweet image in his mind's eye. Five times he had forced himself into her, crouched and afraid and desperate; then he had abandoned her.

Weaver Moodie had cared more for his good name than for Bell Harper. When, months later, he saw her dead in the hut by the Nettleburn, he had felt a great wave of relief. If Bell had tracked him down, had confronted him with his bastard, he would have been ruined. He had so much more than Bell; less to give but more to lose. Now, though, after carousal, blood fired by meats and strong wines, he had deliberately sought out the memory, to relate it to Elspeth, Isobel's daughter. His daughter. He could not accomplish the transference. Elspeth was image, not reality. His love for her was different. If every woman were a daughter or a mother, how the life of a man would be eased. He would not be vulnerable to the distractions and demands that nature fixed like a horse-bit into the heart and soul.

From under the limp leaves that remained on the trees, a draper emerged. James watched longingly. He saw how casually the man adjusted his clothes and strolled back towards the kitchen door; a man of the world, a sophisticate, gratified by his minor adventure. The servant-girl, tall and raven-haired, was casual too. She was no mirror vision of Bell Harper, however. She had no love in her. She tugged down her skirts and tied the ribbons of her bodice. He might call out to her, softly, and she would come to him. He might have her, and no harm to anyone. But the connection would not bring back Bell Harper, would not inch him towards the ultimate degradation, the pretence that his daughter was his wife, that loving Elspeth might absolve him from the sin of murdering poor Bell by ignorance, lust, selfishness and pride.

How he wished he had steered clear of Glasgow in this melancholy October month. He might still take the road out of the city and tramp home in four hours. For an instant he was tempted to surrender to his need to be back in the sanctuary he had created in Balnesmoor; Moss House, Kennart, a chaste marriage.

Elspeth was the only person in the world he loved now that his mother had grown old and senile. How he longed to shed the complex subterfuges of respectability, to walk away from everything, everyone. Duty and niggling doubts about his sanity stayed him, forbade him from yielding to impulse. Hidden by the beech, he lingered until the whore had gone back into the kitchens, then he slipped out of the lane and returned to the oppressive room, to McCracken and the rest of the devil-may-cares, to endure the dying hours of the night.

Tomorrow, however, he would concoct a plausible excuse for quitting Glasgow, for cutting short the visit. He would be home, safe home – with Elspeth – before dusk drew down over the hill of Drumglass.

* * *

A tom-cat covering a mouse-hole has an instinct for timing. It knows by nature when to spring and when to watch and wait. George Cunningham was blessed with a similar instinct. He did not need Trina's nagging to keep him to his post near the front door of the McCracken house in Ingram Street. Though he might harbour some doubt about the eventual value of the proceeding, he, like his woman, was a born opportunist. He had followed the ladies hence after the theatre performance and, after going home to his lodgings to snatch a few hours' sleep, had returned to his look-out shortly after dawn.

It was a murky sort of morning so George wore a heavy pea-jacket and a long muffler against the chill. He arrived in ample time to observe the house servant, a tousled, yawning girl of fifteen or sixteen, unlock the front door and set about to sweep the step and the narrow cobbled path that split the miniature garden down to the wooden paling and the gate. By the time the lass reached the gate with her broom, George just happened to be passing, just happened to raise his cap and bid her a good morning, just happened to stop and strike up a conversation while the girl leaned on the broom-handle and sized him up. If she had been older she might have spotted a charlatan; but she was young and daft and outgoing and, before you could say knife, was answering the stranger's questions unstintingly.

The house belonged to Draper McCracken. He resided there with the wife, Nettie. Visitors were in residence, which made a deal more work for everybody. Visitors up from the country. Visitors? Moodie, him a manufacturer, with a young wife. Moodie and the master had been out most of the night at a meeting in the Buck Head. Meeting? Supper for the Stocking Club. The servant-girl prattled on about the work and the quarters and the mistress of the house, to all of which the stranger listened sympathetically, interjecting a question now and again. A shout from the hallway and the appearance there of a stout woman in a linen apron ended the pleasant chat and the maid-servant was all of a bustle again, whisk-whisking away with the broom. George Cunningham topped his cap and smiled before strolling away, amiably, pipe in mouth, into the curtain of mist that draped the street's end.

Trina found her man, a half-hour later, seated on a horsepost fifty yards from the McCrackens' gate. She had brought him a nibble of breakfast wrapped in a cloth and he broke the bannock and folded it over the slice of cured ham. Talking between mouthfuls, he told Trina what he had learned.

"Moodie," Trina muttered. "Aye, that name chimes wi' me. But I'll need to be seein' him afore I can be certain."

"Draper McCracken had him at the Stockin' Club in the Buck Head last night."

"So Moodie might be connectit wi' the trade."

"Might be a weaver," said George.

"Up from the country. I wonder which part o' the country," said Trina.

"The lassie didn't know."

"What about the girl we saw?"

'Moodie's wife, younger by a lump than her husband."

"Wife, not daughter?"

"Wife."

"Aye, it's peculiar," said Trina. "I'll need to see them both wi' my own eyes."

"Trade's lost for the day," said George. "If you're willin' we'll settle to the task."

"I'm willin'," said Trina. "Who can tell, Georgie, it might be worth the loss o' a day's trade. An' a lot more, forbye."

"Sit here, then, dear one," said George. "Keep warm-wrapped an' snug."

Already the centre of the city was coming vigorously alive. Carters were out, hurrying pedestrians. The confluence of streets and lanes about the new Exchange created a clot of wagons and horses which, by half-past eight, almost blotted out the Cunninghams' view of Draper McCracken's villa. If George had not gone closer, close enough to see that the curtains had been furled in the upstairs' chambers, he might have missed the incident that occurred in the half-hour to nine o'clock. As it was he had to hasten to summon Trina from her seat at the horse-post in time to catch sight of gentlemen as they emerged from the villa and set off down towards Argyle Street. Trina was not built for speed. But her eagerness gave her wings and she danced through a flock of a dozen sheep and through a herd of fourteen milking-cows which had been driven up from the Stockwell and joined her husband just in time to start after the men. One, Cunningham surmised, must be Draper McCracken and the other, in all probability, his visitor, Moodie.

No clear sighting of the pair was possible, short of a confrontation face to face, a situation which had to be avoided, but McCracken did not race away at his usual rate down to Argyle Street and his retail premises. He walked sedately, almost mincingly, as if his head were a great wobbling bladder which required careful balancing. By his side, moderating his stride, was a strong-built man in his forties, swarthy and grim-seeming, wrapped tight in a tailored greatcoat and with a stiff, round, beaver hat on his head.

The city was strident with the din of trade and commerce, with the clack of engines emanating from the windows of cellar and attic workshops, the bawling of street folk, the trundle and groan of big-wheeled carts and the roar and bellow of animal voices rising above the general operatic chorus. The Cunninghams walked with the shuffling gait of born Glaswegians, displaying a sort of ambulatory conceit which stated, in the manner of it, that they would give way to no one. They were so much part of the street parade in the morning hour that neither gentlemen would have remarked them even if they had had occasion to look round.

In due course the draper and his guest swung into Argyle Street and entered the door of John McCracken's shop which was flanked on the right hand by two bow windows of bull's-eye glass. Behind the glass, artistically draped over little teak dressers and ladders, tartans were displayed, together with stockings of various hues and a variety of other garments from the weaving looms. There were two aproned 'lads' within, each armed with measuring strings and enormous metal shears, and, already, several customers poking about in the long trays of stockings, the mainstay of the retail trade.

George and Trina did not enter the shop. They took up a position at the centre window, George with his back to it, his flint tin in his hand and his pipe cocked as he went through the process of finding a spark to light the plug in the clay bowl. He seemed as nonchalant and easy as any man in Argyle Street and Trina, arms folded across her bosom, no more than a casual scrutiniser of the draper's wares.

"Aye," said the woman after two or three minutes. "It's him, the self-same chap from all those years ago. Moodie.

Jamie Moodie. I remember now. He's changed, but not so much as the calendar warrants."

"Are you certain?" muttered George.

"I'd stake my neck on it."

George nodded, collected his wife on his arm and led her back by the way they had come to another period of waiting and watching outside the Ingram Street house.

In due course, an hour or so after Jamie Moodie had returned from Argyle Street, the gentleman and his young wife re-emerged into daylight, and the Cunninghams' patience was rewarded with sight of the quarry. The stalk was properly begun.

At payment of two and a half pence per double mile, the Harlwood Flyer's trips along the road to Glasgow netted the McGowans a tidy sum per annum, particularly as Wattie had established the routes long before Post Office mail contracts had been dreamed of.

Speed was the McGowans' watchword, speed and the ability to forge through, no matter the state of the weather and the roads. In the 'normal' course of events, which meant any day on which the hedgetops stood clear of snow and the floods were less than nostril deep, wee Wattie and one of his sons would be on the board of the light, high-wheeled conveyance. Five passengers could be carried in comfort, plus two more hardy types on top but on that morning there were only two passengers awaiting the Flyer's departure in the ring of the Fosters' Tavern in the Candleriggs.

Coachman McGowan was surprised to see Moodie there. The weaver, Wattie knew, had come to town in his polished cabriolet and would not have sent it back to Moss House if he had intended to return after only one night's sojourn in the city. It was not, however, for the likes of wee Wattie to question the motives of the mighty Mr Moodie and Wattie nudged his eldest son who sprang to receive the valises from the servant and to stow them securely in the boot of the rear of the coach.

In a twinkling, young Wattie had flung open the passenger door, kicked down the drop step and was handing Mistress Moodie into the interior. Old Wattie leaned down from his perch. "Good day to ye, Mistress Moodie."

"Good day t' yourself, Wattie," the young woman answered, but Moodie himself said not a word and looked grim and indrawn as he hoisted himself into the coach.

Minutes later, at a brisk pace, the Flyer bounced out of the tavern yard and headed uphill to the north-west, along a route that would take it through the suburbs into the rolling fields beyond the Saracen's Cross and the smoke-stacks of the St Cyrus Chemical Works.

Elspeth sat by the rattling glass of the off-side window, watching the fragments of the new Glasgow suburbs flit past. She made no attempt to engage her husband in conversation or to discover the true reason, not the excuse he had offered the McCrackens, for their abrupt departure.

James was taciturn and she was wary of riling him since his temper seemed to be smouldering damply like a pile of autumn leaves. She was not particularly sorry to be going home to Balnesmoor. She had enjoyed her visit to the Queens but thought the play itself silly and unsatisfying and had quickly found Nettie McCracken's effusiveness wearing and her vulgar remarks embarrassing. She was also glad that she would not have to spend another night in the Ingram Street house, for sharing a bedroom with her husband – he dozed in a chair by the fire, wrapped in his greatcoat – rubbed home the hollowness of their marriage. Besides, in Glasgow she felt very far away from Michael.

Soon after Wattie made his mail-stop at the Post Office cottage at the Saracen crossroads, the coach would climb a long hill by the mill at Calderbrae and she would see Dumgoyne peeking over the horizon, as if on the look-out for her return. But the Flyer made another halt, to pick up a passenger from St Cyrus.

She heard his voice and, an instant later, found Michael staring at her, hands braced upon the sides of the little door and his face pale. He gave her no greeting by name and Elspeth averted her eyes in confusion lest she too give away what was in her heart.

She stared out of the window at a paddock where carriers' cuddies cropped, at a hideous sod cottage with chickens on the roof and at seven or eight small, ill-clad children who stood dumb as calves by the raddled fence. Beyond the little tableau of poverty, sunlight gilded the distant pastures and lit the beautiful shedding birch trees.

Michael settled himself into the far corner seat.

"Good day to you, sir," he said to James.

But James, who had given the stranger hardly a glance, grunted to indicate that he was not in the mood for chatter.

"Is it not a fine spell of autumnal weather?"

"It is, sir, it is indeed," said Elspeth.

James glared at her and she said no more but sat tense and uneasy.

Michael looked different, changed, very thin and white, though he wore rather formal garb and held a tall hat on his knee.

Outside, young Wattie could be heard bawling at an urchin who had run under the horses' bellies, a dangerous and insane game in which the wild tribes of this impoverished hamlet engaged, much to the McGowans' irritation. There came the thud of a clod on the side of the Flyer and a barrage of curses from driver Wattie, the crack of his long whip, the furious scream of some child or other to whom punishment for stupidity seemed entirely unjust; then the coach was on the move, brisk and crisp, pulling away towards the Lennox boundary.

Michael had removed from inside his coat a small, parchment-bound volume which he pretended to study, though the book wagged and bobbed and the reading of it would have turned him blind if it had been more than a ruse for avoiding Elspeth's eyes. The girl too had turned away, her brow pressed upon the cold glass pane, as if the finger of near-pain in her forehead would freeze the clamour in her heart. Though his eyes were open, James seemed to be asleep.

It was an hour later, eight miles along the turnpike, when the Flyer again reined to a halt. The wayside station was Wattie's hire. Here he would relieve himself, drink a pint of mulled ale and share a half-cheese or a plate of mutton with his son while the horses were given a little feed and water and allowed to rest for a quarter of an hour before tackling the last stage of the journey to Harlwood.

"Do you wish to refresh yourself?" James said gruffly.

"No, I am comfortable here," Elspeth answered.

"I'll stretch my legs, I believe," James said.

There was a deal of shuffling and repositioning as Moodie got himself out of the coach. Michael remained where he was, the book lowered just enough to be polite. No sooner had

James left the Flyer, however, than Michael was at the window.

"Has he gone inside?" whispered Elspeth.

"He has, he has."

"Are you certain?"

"Certain enough." Michael stepped to her and, with his hands on each side of her throat, gently, very gently, tilted her face upwards to meet his lips. He kissed her brow then her mouth. His skin was cold, her own warm.

"Michael, no."

"Does he not know me?" Michael asked.

"He has no occasion to know you."

"Is he always so surly and silent?"

"No. But we should be thankful that he is today. If he had engaged you in conversation –"

Michael kissed her again, drawing her from the seat with his arm, pressing her body against his.

"I must see you. Alone. Soon," he murmured.

Elspeth clung to him. Never before had she felt as she did at that moment, transfused with excitement, borne beyond all sense and reason. If Michael had taken her across the seat of the coach, she would not have raised a cry or done anything to prevent it. Michael, however, drew away from her. He seated himself again by the window.

"Come to the glen tonight," he said.

"No, Michael, I can't."

"Tomorrow?"

"It's not possible."

"Do you still deny that you love me?"

"It's not –" Elspeth was interrupted by the appearance of young Wattie's broad, weather-beaten features in the window. She started guiltily.

"Is the ride soft enough for ye, Mistress Moodie?" Wattie enquired ingenuously.

"Aye, it's fine." Elspeth managed a smile for the coachman's son. "How – how long 'til we reach Balnesmoor?"

"Och, on a day like today, I'd say about an hour," Wattie answered.

McGowan gave no particular attention to Michael Blaven who had retreated behind his book again. There was no doubt, though, that the McGowans knew who Michael was, knew that he lived with Miss Janet in Preaching Friar. All it would take would be a casual word to James and Michael would be identified. Elspeth prayed that her husband would not discover that Michael was no stranger in the Lennox. She feared, without reason, that James would somehow uncover the truth.

"Can I fetch ye a glass o' ale?" said Wattie.

"No, thank you kindly, Mister McGowan."

"Ye'll be home for your tea, I reckon." With a little slap of his hand on the glass by way of farewell, the guard vanished. He could be heard shouting cheerfully to a horseman who had emerged from the stable by the farm cottage.

Michael did not approach her again.

"I must visit you tonight," he whispered.

"Where?" Elspeth said quickly. "Visit me where?"

"I'll come to the garden."

"Please, Michael, no."

"You sleep alone, do you not?"

"He – James – he may be –"

"I cannot bear to think of him with you."

"Don't think of it then," said Elspeth.

"You saw me. That night. In August?"

"Yes."

"You are more lovely than –"

Impulsively Michael reached for her hand before she could withdraw. He tugged her towards him across the width of the coach and kissed her once more upon the mouth.

Every moment increased the chance of discovery. Elspeth could not predict how her husband would act, not this day of all days when he seemed so queer and indrawn. She fumbled for the strap of the carriage door. She had to separate herself from Michael, to be away from him or every shred of rectitude and caution would be thrown to the winds.

"Don't go, please," Michael begged.

Resolutely, Elspeth opened the door and, disregarding the mud, slipped from the coach to the ground. She walked unsteadily around the rear of the conveyance and looked across the rise of the fields to the dear, familiar hills. Now they offered her no sense of security and comfort, no protection. She could not escape from her emotions, from her need of Michael Blaven. Then she saw James, her husband, distanced from her by the sward before the cottages. He plodded over the rutted mud from the rear of the dwellings, the greatcoat about his shoulders. He appeared so strong, so pugnacious, without any degree of suavity; a country weaver in the afternoon of his life. She had never seen him so before, coarsened, thickened. She moved towards him nonetheless, welcomingly.

"Are you unwell, James?"

"Hm? No, no, I'm just glad to be nearin' home."

She offered him her arm. Stiffly, he took it and walked her back the few yards to the coach. She hated herself for what she was doing, demonstrating to Michael that she belonged to James Simpson Moodie who would protect her even against the kind of love that Michael offered, a love which could consume and destroy her by its physical intensity. From that fate only James could defend her for she had no will of her own.

Defiantly Elspeth sat by her husband's side, clinging to his arm throughout the rest of the journey, her face scarlet with the shame of the double deception.

It had not been Randall's intention to tease his brother but the opportunity somehow arose and he could not resist it. Gilbert was such a fool with a gun that there was a certain danger in the sport too but Randall, who had hardly left the house in the weeks since his return, revelled in the hazards of following Gibbie, unseen, out on to the sprig of shorn ground where pheasants were occasionally to be bagged for the pot.

Gilbert carried his father's ancient muzzle-loader and was accompanied by Todd, a toothless fossil but as close to a keeper of game as Ottershaw chose to support.

Gibbie's marksmanship was notoriously erratic. To be within a mile of Gibbie when he had a gun in his hands was an experience to jangle the nerves.

"God, man!" Todd would grumble to his chums. "It is safer bein' the prey than the keeper, since a man is larger than a bird."

Quite aware of his brother's failings Randall was exceedingly careful to keep himself not only out of sight but below the range of the gun, under the hill which dived from the grazing, in a luxuriant wimple of weeds, into a little meandering burn. Here spring-mad bullocks often took wing, thinking they were larks, and broke their backs in bellowing astonishment. There were no bullocks in the field that afternoon, however, and al would have been well with bird, beast and man if a leggy and inexperienced half-grown hare had not stopped to cock an eye at the creature which crashed along the edge of the corn stubble.

Randall saw the hare before Gibbie did and prudently eased himself against the trunk of a young birch which had found root on the burn bank just before the hare sprang and darted downward in a zig-zag flight.

Later it was claimed that Todd had saved the laird's life and prevented a horrible act of fratricide, but this was quite untrue.

Todd had come to the edge of the fall and had just glimpsed the glint of Randall's brand-new, lightweight No. 7 bore detonator, which required the lugging of no awkward ancillary equipment, when Gibbie raised the flintlock and wagged it in the general direction of the hare.

"No, sir, no!" Todd bawled out.

Distracted by the keeper's outburst Gilbert snatched the trigger and the flintlock exploded.

The hare, relieved, stopped, sat on its hind legs and offered a little prayer with its paws while, by the birch, Randall Bontine slumped forward and, with a hand pressed to his breast, raised an accusing arm and pointed an accusing finger at his brother on the slope above him.

"Murderer," Randall gasped. "Mur-der-er."

Then the new laird of Ottershaw and Balnesmoor rolled on to his back, to all intents and purposes a goner from this world.

"God in Heaven, sir, you have kilt him," Todd hissed in horrified amazement.

"Killed who?"

"Mister Randall, sir."

"Devil take me, so I have," said Gibbie.

What Gilbert did not confess, then or later, was that he felt a little twinge of elation at the sight of his brother in a position of demise. There had been many occasions in the past weeks when he would willingly have shot the damned man, not out of spiteful jealousy but just to open him up. Fear, of course, swiftly replaced pleasure. Todd was already sledding down the hillside on the seat of his breeks and Gilbert followed him in a frightful panic at what he had done.

Randall was discovered on his back, injured knee stretched straight, the other bent, both palms pressed against his chest where, presumably, the ball had entered to deliver its mortal wound. His eyes were closed.

"Todd, have I killed him? God, have I killed my own brother?"

Gilbert flung himself to his knees by the side of the corpse and leaned over, searching for blood.

"Is he dead? Is he dead?"

Hands closed suddenly about Gibbie's throat and a voice growled, "Not quite, Gibbie."

Gibbie sagged. "You pig, Randall."

Randall said, "If it had not been for a timely warning uttered by your trusty servant, however, I would have been the victim of your pique."

"No, no, Randall. I intended you no harm." Gibbie struggled against the fists which had slipped down to the collar of his coat. "Do you imagine that I would do you an injury?"

"I imagine, dear brother, that you might."

The servant had stopped close by.

"But – but why?" Gilbert asked.

"Don't play the innocent, Gibbie. I've seen how your wife looks at me. God, man, if she could shoot a dagger as deadly as she shoots a glance I would be a sieve by now."

"Alicia? What does she – Randall, it was an accidental mishap," said Gibbie, in a state of ire, confusion and guilt. "Will you not believe me?"

"Help me up."

Randall accepted Gibbie's support.

"You, what's your name?"

"Todd, sir."

"Well done this day, Todd. You shall have a dram or two as your reward."

If Todd was amazed at this interpretation of the events of the past few minutes he gave no sign of it. He had experienced Bontine promises before. When the laird returned to the house the promise would most like be forgotten and he would have no reward at all.

"Todd, I am weak in the leg, as you've no doubt observed," said Randall. "I'll need your shoulder to help me to the top of the brae."

"Aye, sir."

"Gilbert, gather the guns and accoutrements."

"What?"

"It's too damp in the air to leave valuable shooting-pieces ut. Do as I say."

"Randall, I'm not your lackey."

"Gibbie, you have been poaching my game."

The change of tack caught Gilbert off-guard.

"What's that you say?"

Wisely, Todd had already begun to divest himself of gear. ow he left the brothers to clamber up the slope to retrieve e equipment which had been shed on Gibbie's panic-ridden escent. He, if not his master, could see what sort of sport was eing made by the laird. It gave the servant grim amusement be part of it. He listened to the raised voices which floated ke an argument of fowls above the burn.

"Poacher? What do you mean?"

"I am the laird and landed possessor –"

"Randall, I cannot credit my ears."

"Is it not my game too?"

"Randall, I –"

"I let you eat at my table, warm yourself at my fire, but I ee no reason why I should permit you to discharge a fowling-iece at my head."

"I explained that –"

"It's time, Gilbert, that I paid you off."

"Paid me? Paid me for what?"

"Paid you the sum specified as your portion," said Randall. I will draft a note on the bank for immediate settlement of he full amount. I will do it tonight, in fact."

"And then, what then?"

"If you and your wife will join me for dinner –"

"Where? In the library?" said Gilbert.

Like his father before him, Randall had made the library he hub of his existence. He lived in solitude within the ong chamber, eating there alone while the rest of the family athered in the dining-room on the ground floor. He seldom eft the divan by the fire or the chair at the long table which, o Gibbie had discovered, was littered with rent-books and ommercial documents going back two or three decades. The ale of the estate was written there and seemed of more moment and merit to Randall than the reality which lay beneath the leaded windows or beyond the carved oak doors.

"We will dine at seven in the dining-hall," said Randall, "if it is convenient."

"It is," said Gilbert, now thoroughly flummoxed. "It is, of course, convenient. We would be dining –"

"Good," said Randall as Todd returned. "Now, load yourself up like a good fellow. Do not walk before us, in case the flintlock happens to go off across your shoulder. Follow at a safe distance behind, please."

"I will help you. Let Todd tote the –"

"Come, Todd." Randall pushed himself from the tree. "Give me your arm, if you will."

With the aged little keeper tucked under his shoulder like an improvised crutch, Randall tackled the hillside while his brother, fuming, struggled with the welter of equipment which had previously burdened the servant.

Unlike Todd, Gibbie received no gratuity, no sixpence in the palm for his pains.

All Gibbie got was the unequivocal order of the boot.

Alicia resembled nothing so much as a giant floribunda. After swithering for hours in her dressing-room between mourning-garb, which would have been rather appropriate, and a court-dress so replete with swaying hoops that it made Gilbert quite giddy just to watch her walk in it, Alicia had chosen a gaudy thing of lace and rose embroidery. Into the bosom of the dress she had inserted waxen 'artificials' which she powdered to match her own not insignificant protruberances, a version of lily-gilding which left Gilbert flabbergasted, though it did, he had to admit, give Alicia astonishing Amazonian authority. Even so, as he accompanied her down to the dining-room, he could not help feeling that his wife had abrogated all reality in the name of fashion.

"Be calm, my dear, be calm," Gilbert muttered.

Alicia snorted and sucked her teeth nervously.

Hunter flung open the door of the dining-room and the couple entered like strangers the room in which they had dined night in and night out for years.

Randall, however, had changed the friendliness of the long room. He had gone for drama and the table glittered with the amily's best silver and crystal, treasures which had hardly een out of the safe-cabinets in a lifetime.

Gilbert bit his lip and took his seat at the dining-table vithout a word of protest at the sacrilege. Randall had gone he whole hog, had dressed in the uniform of an officer of Iussars, all except the swagged sword and tall, polished hat. t occurred to Gibbie that if he had been a Frenchie confronted vith a line of fellows so attired he would have flung heroics to he wind and set off for the horizon at the gallop.

Hunter, in cream-coloured gloves, waddled to his master's ide. Though well into his sixty-fifth year, Hunter knew how o be obsequious and gave the impression that if the new laird o desired he would fold himself naked on an enormous platter nd stick an apple in his mouth.

Candles burned in silver holders and, though the October ight was mild, a great log fire crackled in the hearth. All the ervants were in attendance as if Randall were entertaining wo score house-guests and not merely his brother and wife.

During the course of the meal, which was wholesome rather han exotic, Randall exchanged vacuous pleasantries with Alicia who replied, effortlessly, in kind. Gilbert was annoyed; lid Randall suppose that they were such shallow, rusticated olk that they could not be spoken to without that patronising mile?

When the meal was finally over the long table was swept lean except for bowls of nuts and a silver box which held lecanters. The entire operation was performed with such fficiency that Gilbert glanced often at the servants' faces to emind himself that they were the same people who waited on im so languorously every other night.

Without asking Alicia's permission, Randall took a cheroot rom a leather wallet and lit it from a candle.

Randall paused, head thrown back, as if he were savouring he moment as well as the rich inhalation of tobacco smoke. Ie held the pose so long that Alicia's patience expired.

"Have we nothing to discuss, Randall?" she snapped.

"Ah, yes," Randall answered softly. "We have much to iscuss."

"Can we not get to it, in that case?"

"Of course, Alicia, of course."

He clapped his hands and called out in a voice that made the decanters vibrate, "Hunter, show the gentleman in."

"What gentleman?" Alicia demanded.

Randall let her wait for an answer.

Hunter, who had only just closed the dining-room door, flung it open again and ushered in an angular man attired in rusty black knee-breeches and a coppled coat that had been out of fashion when Plato was a boy.

"Mister Angus Hildebrand," Hunter announced.

"Good evening to you, Madam," Hildebrand bowed. "Good evening to you, also, Mister Bontine."

Alicia slapped a hand to her wax bosom as if it had suddenly begun to melt. She gave a short bark of astonishment and dismay. But Gilbert's anxiety vanished in that instant and, to his surprise, he felt a tickle of laughter in his throat.

Randall was such a showman, so devious, so conniving, so thoroughly on top of everyone and everything; Gilbert could not but admire his style.

"I believe you are acquainted with Lawyer Hildebrand?" said Randall affably. "Come, sir, sit here by me."

Hildebrand carried with him one of the cases that Gilbert had last seen lining the dingy chamber in Dumbarton town. Hildebrand took the chair on Randall's right, untied the buckram straps from around the box, laid out a copy of the will and a single-page document which seemed short-weight for the magnitude of the business that would stem from it.

"Where are the lawyers?" said Alicia suddenly.

"Mister Hildebrand is a lawyer," said Randall.

"I mean the Ottershaw lawyers, your father's agents."

"Oh!" Randall innocently blew a ring of smoke from the cheroot. "I received the impression that you did not trust the intregrity of Dixon and Royle. Otherwise, why would you take counsel on the conditions of the will and testament, not to mention the breaking of them, from Mister Hildebrand?"

"It seems there's no integrity, especially among members of the legal profession," said Alicia, glaring at Hildebrand.

"I was not, Madam, retained by your esteemed person," said Hildebrand, "and did not deem it, therefore, a matter of either breach of confidence nor of conscience to accept fee from the rightful laird of Ottershaw."

Gilbert cleared his throat. "We are aware, Randall, that the will and testament cannot be altered to permit my wife and me to share in Ottershaw. Mister Hildebrand made that perfectly clear."

"Candidly, Gibbie, I've no particular objection to sharing the house with you," said Randall. "But I do object to sharing it with your wife, particularly as she made such strenuous efforts to rob me of my entitlement."

"You are not competent," said Alicia. "In three years or five you will ruin Ottershaw."

"I'll not ruin Ottershaw at all," said Randall. "However, you've placed your finger on the sore spot, Alicia. You see, I'll make Ottershaw pay. Damn me, Gilbert, have you examined the accounts?"

"Of course," said Gilbert. "Ottershaw is profitable."

"Ottershaw is piffling," said Randall. "I admit that my father managed to salt away a goodly sum. How otherwise could I pay off his bequests and still hold on to the lands of the estate? I admit, too, that Father had certain progressive inclinations, especially in the way of sheep-breeding. But it is not enough."

"Not enough for what, pray?" said Alicia.

"Not enough for me," said Randall. "I intend to expand."

"Expand? How and in what direction?" said Gilbert.

"To repossess the ridiculously cheap leases as they fall due, for a beginning," said Randall. "To shift the use of the land from rearing, at least in fair part, and cultivate more acres."

"But why, Randall?" said Gibbie, interested in spite of himself. "I cannot understand why management is not enough. Surely it is not the role of the Bontines to grab and devour. Only to hold and to maintain."

"I care not a toss for the name of the Bontines," said Randall, "the illustrious mediocrity of our past. Good God, Gibbie, in a generation we could be swallowed up unless, like the python, we increase the width of our jaws."

"What does this have to do with us?" said Alicia. "Do you believe that we would hinder you?"

"Alicia, you would do anything to possess Ottershaw."

"Come to the point, regarding the future," said Gilbert.

"Father left seven thousand pounds, a very considerable sum," said Randall. "As close perusal of the will should have shown you, it was a lump sum to be paid to me should I choose to forfeit claim to Ottershaw."

Alicia's head flicked up. "Are you taking the money, is that it?"

"If, however," Randall went on, ignoring the question, "if I chose to return to Ottershaw, then a similar sum was to be paid to you, Gibbie. Poor little Robbie comes thin out of it all. But poor little Robbie will not starve; I'll see to that. Besides, poor little Robbie is only our half-brother and will share in Irish money from Marinwood in due course of time, or partake of the sum that Father left for Mother Elizabeth's comfort."

"Quite!" said Gibbie. "If you are the new laird, we'll not see Mother here again, I fear."

"That must be her choice. I would not deny her a place here," said Randall.

"She despises you, Randall," said Alicia.

"Well," said Randall, "I do not despise her. She is a fine woman and may marry again. I wish her well for her future."

"What of our future, my children's future?" said Gibbie.

"Sooner or later, Gib, that old muzzle-loader of yours might point at my head in earnest."

"Ridiculous!" Gilbert shouted.

"Besides, you would not be comfortable here with me. Seven thousand pounds will buy you a house and land which is better than moor and bog. It will be for you to make of it what you can. I prefer to have Ottershaw for myself."

Gilbert could see wisdom glimmering behind Randall's insults. It wasn't, however, a simple yearning for independence that moved his brother. It would not be liberty that Randall desired but licence, room not just to manipulate the future of Ottershaw but to exercise power in ways that were alien to the old lairds of the Lennox. If Randall intended to turn tyrant, then he was right to thrust his brothers and sisters from him; it was a law of tyranny that tyrants must stand alone.

Gilbert said, "How soon do you wish us to take our leave?"

"As soon as you have found a suitable accommodation," Randall answered. "Mister Hildebrand, would you be good enough to give my brother the document for signature."

Hildebrand, Gibbie noticed, no longer seemed so loquacious as he had been those months ago in Dumbarton. If his guess was correct Messrs Dixon and Royle would soon find themselves discharged in favour of the stork-like Angus Hildebrand.

There was, first of all, a convertible note on the account of the Estate of Ottershaw for the sum of seven thousand pounds, drawn on the account of Gilbert Lawrence Bontine from the offices of the Bank of Scotland in the Lawnmarket of Edinburgh, countersigned by Randall and already attested by Hildebrand as to authenticity. To accompany the note were two certificates, also attested, confirming the death of Gilbert Lawrence Bontine, *et cetera*. Receipt for the sum and an acknowledgement of settlement of the clause of the testament made up the rest of the papers. With a quill pen and inkstand brought in by Hunter, Gilbert did his business with signatures there and then and wrote off Ottershaw. It was a strangely perfunctory rite for such a final result.

Tight-lipped, Alicia watched. She felt victimised by the turn of fortune and furious at her husband, even though he had only buckled to the inevitable.

Randall poured himself a bumper from the decanter and drank it off in a swallow. He groped for the thick, polished stick that he had placed by the table-leg and hoisted himself to his feet, stiff after the prolonged period of inactivity. He motioned to Hildebrand who, still without uttering a word, rose and gathered the papers into the box.

"If you will pardon us," Randall said, with dry formality, "I will avail myself of Mister Hildebrand's presence to discuss several matters of a private nature."

Gibbie scrambled to his feet. "Shall Alicia and I leave?"

"Stay where you are, Gibbie. I'll be more comfortable in the library. Come, sir."

Followed by Hildebrand the laird of Ottershaw limped out of the dining-room.

Hunter paused in the doorway. "Will there by anythin' else for you, Master Gilbert?" he enquired.

"No, Hunter. Nothing."

The door closed.

Alicia let out her breath, the edges of the 'artificials' breaking free from her breast and forming two scalloped lines, like gills. She picked the frontage out with her fingers and dropped it upon the table, contemplating it as if Randall had unmothered her at the stroke of a pen.

"Well, dearest," said Gilbert, with a sigh, "that would appear to be that. We had better begin our search for a new home. Do you have a fancy for Ireland?"

"I have a fancy, Gilbert, for nowhere in the world but here."

"Now, Alicia, that cannot be."

"Harlwood, then. Killearn or Blanefield," she said. "Randall has done all he can to us, Gilbert. Your brother's wish is different from your father's will. He cannot prevent us settling nearby."

"He won't like it."

"All the more reason to do it."

"Alicia –"

"I want to be close enough to keep an eye on your brother. And on Ottershaw." She got to her feet. "Look for land, Gilbert," she commanded, as if she expected him to stride out into the night with a lantern. "Look for land in the Lennox. Land that may be worked, and a comfortable house. Oh, and approach Sinclair."

"Sinclair?"

"Sinclair is the best grieve in the county, is he not?"

"Well, yes, I suppose –"

"Then, whatever the cost, we must not leave Sinclair behind."

Elspeth listened to the creak of the big kitchen door as Tolland pushed it shut. Seated on the edge of the bed, already dressed in a warm frock and with a shawl about her shoulders, she heard the steward slap the bolt into its socket. Then there was silence below, a silence through which Tolland would stroll back to his cubby in the one-apartment abutment to the kitchen quarters which James had had constructed the year he had bought Moss House.

Usually James undertook the nightly ritual of securing the house himself. Until recently there had been no need to make doors and windows fast but of late there had been a spate of thefts in the district, much stealing from houses after dark, and James was afraid for the safety of his silver. Tonight, however, her husband had been too weary to sit up. He had given instructions to Tolland and had retired to his room immediately after supper. Elspeth too had gone upstairs early. She had dismissed her night maid to the attic where the females slept, segregated by the height of the house from male servants on the ground floor. There had been 'trouble' with servants in the past. But it was not one of the lassies who would steal downstairs tonight to join with a lover. It would be the mistress of Moss House herself.

The clock on the dressing-chest told Elspeth that it was eleven o'clock. When the tiny, hardly-audible tinkle of wires rang out, the girl got up and went to the casement, unlatched it and eased it wide open. There was no moon. The air was moderately warm for October, stirred by a rustling wind. The shrubbery was very dark. At first she could see nothing, then, with a catch of breath, saw Michael step from the protection of the evergreens.

For a heart-stopping moment Elspeth imagined that it was not Michael at all but her husband. She flinched and stepped back until the flicker of a lantern, screened by a cheesecloth, gave her a glimpse of Michael's features. She understood the signal, though it had not been arranged. She was no longer calm. The implications of her action crowded upon her, making her tremble. She did not, however, hang back. She gathered her courage and slipped quickly out of the bedroom. She sped on tiptoe along the corridor, down the broad staircase and across the hallway into the passage that led her to the door which separated the kitchens from James's private study.

The kitchen door had a plate-sized lock and a long, iron key. She paused, leaning her forehead against the grained surface, listening. Tolland's lair was far across the kitchens. Luke McWilliams, the arrogant little boot-boy, had grown too mature to billet in the house; now he slept in the stable loft. She felt for, found and turned the long key. It clacked deafeningly in the lock and the base of the door grated against the flagstone when she tugged it open. She extracted the key and dropped it into a scarf which she pushed into the pocket of her frock. She paused again, listened again. She heard nothing except the empty appeal of the wind about the garden and, irrevocably, stepped outside and closed the door behind her.

The wind had grown stronger in the past few minutes. It tossed the branches vigorously, manipulated the massy shrubs, and carried the enquiring yap of a stable dog to her. The draughts of air, though, were to her advantage, would disperse any sounds which she might make, confuse them with the bangings and knockings of the restless night.

Michael touched her.

She started and almost cried out. He drew her to him, kissed her mouth. Elspeth had never been kissed with such demanding tenderness before. She felt the tip of Michael's tongue touch hers and instinctively parted her lips. Now she realised that what she had endured in the bedroom had not been indifference or stoicism but a mounting desire which demanded no instruction, only opportunity. Michael put his hand under her breast. Romance was willingly exchanged for passion. After that first embrace loving would never be the same for the girl off the Nettleburn. She was caught in a tide of sensation.

"We mustn't stay here, my darling," he murmured."

"Where then?"

"Come with me."

"It's cold upon the moor, Michael."

"We will keep each other warm," Michael whispered. "I have brought plaids. We'll be snug as drovers since there is no frost tonight."

Elspeth did not protest. She trusted him. Besides, she was eager, incredibly eager, to experience love. The need freed her, it seemed, from ownership. Michael would not possess her as husbands possessed their wives. He would take only what she offered him, her heart, her love. It was love she owed Michael, not loyalty, not a dutiful submission to his will. He took her hand and led her through the shrubs towards the high straight hedges, to a corner of the lawn by the Chinese pavilion. Elspeth would, after all, have preferred the wild moor. But the moor was shuttered in moonless darkness. The boxed lawn was far enough away from the house to be safe. Michael had already spread the plaids on the grass behind the pavilion's steps. The close-knit hedges baffled the wind. Michael pulled her down. Kneeling, he kissed her again and again, stroking her body ardently with his hands.

"I love you, my darling. I have never loved anyone as I love you. I did not believe that it was possible to need someone so much," he whispered. "I want you so desperately."

She had no breath, no words to tell him how she felt. She worked her fingers down the fastening which held the bodice of the frock to her body. She let it part so that he might slip his fingers beneath her undershift and caress her breasts. She felt the softness of his mouth upon her and held him, cradling his head with her hands, pressing him against her while her body ran with fire. She was astonished by her lack of fear. Even when he stretched her back upon the plaid and laid himself upon her, furling up her skirts and touching her thighs, she did not struggle or resist but aided him with frantic urgency.

Michael could not know that she had not been loved before. She bit her lip when pain came, a scalding little sting, not severe, soothed by her readiness. Arms laced about his shoulders, she lifted herself against him. She gasped not with pain but with pleasure, then lay back once more, surprised by the ease with which he had entered her. Closing her eyes, she sighed until the breath caught in her throat and swelled in her bosom. She could hardly bear it, hold it, then in a sudden, unexpected surge of relief, heard herself utter a strange soft growl that hardly seemed to come from her lips at all.

Michael lifted himself a little and, reaching, found a corner of the plaid and brought it over them. Joined still in utmost intimacy, the couple kissed and toyed with each other. Across the hedges the great sloughing draughts of air dipped and swirled. They seemed to lift her up, fill her with their sourceless energy.

"Love me," she pleaded. "Love me, Michael, love me."

She had no shame in asking it.

In that hour Elspeth had no more thought of consequence than had the wind on the hill and, later, no more regret at what came of it.

FIVE

In Love for Long

The laird of Ottershaw did not cultivate the appearance of a new broom. On the contrary, he sported the look of a very old one. He had rummaged in the chests for apparel which his father had stored and had put together a style which he would stamp his own, a mixture of hand-me-down rig and military which, with only changes of linen, he would wear in all seasons except full summer. His only concession to elegance was a long straight cane with a silver handle and an iron tip which was seldom out of his hand in those early months.

Dressed thus in heavy herring-bone and dour tartan trews, the laird stumped out of the back door of Ottershaw to meet his grieve in the October morn, to make it known that he would be no recluse but master of the show and out and about at all hours.

"Now, Sinclair, show me round my menagerie."

"Is it the beasts you're wantin' to see first, sir?"

"All of it."

"It'll take much time, laird."

"Time? God, I've naught but time, Sinclair. Let us begin with the dairy. I've a notion to find some new domestics."

"Surely the house has sufficient servants, sir."

"They are mostly occupied with Gibbie and his brats and are trained in Gibbie's ways. No, I want lively faces about me."

Sinclair did not argue. He was not responsible for the house. He had a notion that the kind of servants Randall would select would be pretty young women. He had heard of indecencies that besmirched the name of families in other quarters of the Lennox.

"Many of the farm servants, the females, are married," said Sinclair casually.

"I want them to work, not to bed," Randall snapped, as if reading the grieve's thoughts.

Sinclair flushed. "I meant only that we follow a policy of employin' wives in a day capacity. We prefer a system of split workin', in the dairy for instance."

"What is split working?"

They were walking towards the dairy yard, away from the house. Randall's progress was brisk. He stabbed the iron of the cane into the dirt and screwed himself forward on it. There was impatience in the movement which indicated pain. Try as he might, though, Sinclair could feel no pity for the soldier-laird.

"The mornin' milk is taken off by four wives," the grieve explained. "The evening milkin' is done by four others. The females work each a half-day, and are paid at a rate accordin' "

"Why do we not employ them in the ordinary manner?"

"Because it is wasteful of labour."

"You must convince me of that, Sinclair."

"Your father –"

"My father was more credulous than I am. However, we will put that aside until this evening. I shall be obliged if you will take supper with me, Sinclair, at seven o'clock. You need not waste your time, since you seem to be so conscious of the value of each and every minute, by dressing and grooming. There will be only you and I and we will take food in the library, without ceremony."

"Will there be a particular subject under discussion, sir?"

"Why do you ask?"

"In order that I might furnish myself with the necessary papers."

"Many subjects will be under discussion, particularly the land survey," Randall answered. "But I have copies of all the papers to hand. I wish mainly to hear your opinions on general farming matters."

"My opinions, sir, are held for the benefit of Ottershaw."

"I do not dispute it," said Randall. "In the meantime let us survey the young crop and see what the dairy has to offer."

Gloomily Sinclair led the way into the parlour where the girls, Anna included, were already stroking what milk was to be had from the teats.

* * *

There had been a moment, a fleeting instant, when Anna felt sure that Randall had recognised her. It was a day she would never forget, that forenoon of his home-coming, when Mr Randall had climbed down from the coach at the front door of Ottershaw and the grieve had solemnly taken off his hat and, on the signal, all the field-workers and the dairymaids, the horsemen and the little contingent of foresters who had herded out of the plantation for the event, all had cheered each time Lachie Sinclair had thrust his bonnet skywards.

The new laird had seemed oblivious to the welcome of the tenantry, the assembly of 'his' people. He had not raised his hand in acknowledgement, had not even turned to glance back at them. He had brushed Gibbie aside, Hunter too, when they came to assist him from the lopsided coach.

He had come down like an otter with a broken spine; still lean, still lithe, still quick but hampered by one part of his body, the left leg, and by something else that none of the women and girls could quite place at first and only later, prompted by McDonald, identified as pure, white pain.

The leaves had been swept from the drive and stone terraces. The borders had been trimmed, hurdles and feeding racks and the other untidy appurtenances of farming tucked away out of sight, everything made neat and tidy for the coach's arrival. There was no rain, though it threatened every minute of the ninety that the crowd waited, lined up by the driveway, and came only a minute after Randall had limped indoors.

Brigit had whispered, "By God, will ye be lookin' at the state o' him. Is the mannie drunk?"

"No, no," Anna had said through pursed lips. "No, no, no."

Inch by inch he had descended from the coach, defying anyone to offer aid. He looked worn out, worn down. From him emanated the only real breath of war that most of the good folk of Balnesmoor and Ottershaw would ever have, a whiff of the suffering and courage that soldiers in the foreign fields were forced to live with and thrive upon.

Anna felt the flutter in her breast, a fearful relief that the ball or blade had not taken Randall's life, lest in some intricate supernatural manner, stemming from the dummy's spell, she too had sickened and on that day died.

The wound did not diminish Randall in Anna's eyes, did not rob him of the aura which her imagination had put around him. On the contrary, even from forty yards away Anna had felt closer to him than ever, now that he was here in the flesh before her. When the new laird turned suddenly and stared direct at her, Anna's throat had closed in a kind of sob. She had stared straight and direct back at him, unaware of the real reason why he had selected her out of the fifty-odd folk who were gathered there, not vain enough, not with all the rich emotions that were floating in the air that day, to believe that it was her beauty which had caught and held his eye.

Randall Bontine had recognised her! Randall Bontine had remembered her! She could settle now, be patient, be certain that the binding spell would take its course, progress in stages like a fever. She was sure in her heart of hearts that Randall would seek her out and confront her, though the poor wounded man might not know why.

Later that night, with Matt sprawled across her, she had stared at the roof of the wee back room in the cottage in the pines and had imagined that she was floating away, rising like a wreath of mist to alight at the path's end, drift through the half-open window of *his* bedroom, lie by *his* side.

Later still, Matt on his back by her had said, "Aye, he's a queer-lookin' tyke, right enough. Him an' that corkscrew walk."

"He was injured fightin' the French. In single combat."

"Tripped o'er a keg o' ale, more like."

"Hold your rotten tongue, Matt."

"Och, an' what's wrong? Think he'll hear us?"

"He's our laird. We're his servants."

"I'm no bloody servant. Not Bontine's, anyhow."

"Just Pad Tomelty's."

She had not cared if Matt lost his temper with her. She needed to commence the process of release, not even to commence but to complete. She had never 'belonged' to Matt Sinclair, had never cleaved to him. Now that Randall was ensconced again in Ottershaw, Anna knew that it would only be a matter of time until the binding spell was fulfilled.

Beef was the prime produce of the Ottershaw cattle herds which, of course, took precedence over the sheep flocks. For all that, with butter selling at seven pounds per hundredweight in the wholesale markets of Glasgow and cheese at thirteen shillings each stone, this source of profit was not neglected by Lachlan Sinclair who ensured that the cows were kept in good health and that the dairy was run along 'modern' lines to keep the daily yield as constant as nature would allow. The parlour was clean, the buckets scalded before and after use and the big flat tubs used for creaming and separating were scrubbed every day, habits which the dairymaids did not understand but had grown used to. Sweet milk was taken off to feed the calves and Sinclair would have no casual slopping done by the stockmen. Woe betide anyone, woman or man, who brought laziness and dirty manners into the yard, for they would be blamed if the cows gave less than eighteen hundred pints each in the course of the season, as if cleanliness had anything to do with fat teats.

To Anna it began like any other day. She milked her allotment of cows and took the buckets one by one to the stone-glazed chamber through the tunnel where they were measured by weight by Mr Pryde and his boy. She returned to the steaming, cow-lowing interior of the parlour from which the animals were being led away by the herd laddies.

And there was Randall, along with her father-in-law and Hearn, the head dairyman, in the strewed stall at the parlour's nether end.

Anna dabbed her nose with her sleeve, tucked straggling hair under her bonnet, gave a discreet spit into her palms and rubbed her cheeks then came on, swinging her hips sonsily.

Randall had picked her up the moment she had entered the parlour by the narrow door. He followed her with his gaze as she wended through the cows into the cleared stretch where the lads were already raking muck into a ridged heap. Randall did not falter in his conversation with her father-in-law, nor did he give the least sign of recognition. But his eyes never left her until she went past him and out of the wide door into the yard.

In passing she glanced at him. She did not nod or drop a curtsy or flutter her eyelids or scowl and grunt a greeting, none of the responses that dairymaids and farm labourers would have contrived to cover an encounter with the laird. She just glanced at him and walked, swinging, on. But as soon as she cleared the open doors she had to stop to catch her breath.

She leaned against the post by the door, out of sight of the three men but not out of earshot.

"Yes, that one," she heard Randall say.

"She's no domestic, sir. She's never been trained to the house," her father-in-law said.

"The work," said Randall, "demands no special skills."

"I cannot recommend her, laird."

"Can you not, Sinclair? I want her. That's an end of it."

"Laird, she's – she's my son's wife."

"In which case I'm sure she'll be honest and loyal. Tell her to come to the kitchen tomorrow morning. Has she infants or children at home?"

"No, no she has not."

"In that case," said Randall, "Hunter will offer her the full day rate. What does the husband do?"

"He's my son, laird."

"Ah, so he's studying to be my grieve in course of time, is he?"

"He – aye – he's with the foresters now."

"Bring the girl to Hunter in the morning. She'll have a better rate than in the dairy and be warmer in the winter, indoors. Altogether more congenial for a member of your family. Is there something amiss, Sinclair?"

The grieve was silent, lips compressed and eyelids hooded, signs which anybody in the district would have identified as indignant anger.

"Is there?" Randall insisted.

"No, sir."

"Very well," Randall said. "You will be pleased to inform the girl of my wishes and see to it that she understands."

"Aye, sir. Will you be requirin' other girls from the byre?"

"Yes, one more. And a boy."

"A boy?"

"A boy old enough to wipe his nose in the mornings," said Randall. "Who is there about the place that might suit?"

"Another girl," said Sinclair, in a tone of stern disapproval, "and a boy? Might I enquire, sir, what will be required of the 'new' domestics?"

"Hunter will see that they know their duties," said Randall. "Come along now, let's get this done so that we might turn our minds to less trivial matters."

The voices diminished. Anna came away from the doors and walked diagonally across the yard, catching her father-in-law's last remark, "There's the Tomelty lass, sir. A very willin' worker," as she went.

She glanced over her shoulder. The three men, Hearn still tagging along, were strolling down the aisle of the parlour while the muck-lad stood with his rake and broom to arms, as if he were a sentry put to guard, not dispose of, the dung. As if conscious of her attention, Randall stopped himself with the cane and swung suddenly round.

Anna did not look away; this time she smiled.

Randall Bontine, however, did not smile in response but, with a strange indifferent shrug of his shoulders, turned back to face the hindquarters of the last of the departing cows.

It did not matter; Anna was elated.

He had asked for her, demanded her. He had brought her into his house and, if she was half the woman she supposed herself to be, in time he would bring her to his bed.

Preaching Friar was not Moss House, being smaller and more cosy, and Miss Blaven was more astute than a husband when it came to reading signs. It had shocked her to discover that Michael had not returned to his room until four of the clock. She could not decide whether she was concerned mainly for his moral welfare, or for the injury to his health that might result from spending the night hours out of doors in Heaven knows what conditions. She also believed that discovery was inevitable and that it would only be a matter of time until Moodie descended on Preaching Friar, ranting and raging and creating a loud, and justified, fuss. To soothe her nerves, Miss Blaven made a concoction of skullcap and valerian and sipped the nasty-tasting cordial slowly as if in penance for her carelessness in allowing Michael to run wild. Perhaps, though, her nephew had tried to untangle himself. Had he not gone off home to Glasgow without proper explanation, hinting that it was time to make peace with his father? Michael had been in an elated mood when he returned unexpectedly to Preaching Friar. But he was too ingenuous to keep the reason from his aunt for long.

"I met her on the Flyer," he blurted out. "By chance, by coincidence."

"Do you refer to Mister Moodie's wife?"

"I do."

"Ah, so now you have also met Weaver Moodie."

"How do you know that Elspeth was not travelling alone?"

"Do not be a fool, Michael. Women do not have the sort of enviable freedoms that bless males in our society."

"She might have been accompanied by a maid or female relative."

"Michael!" Janet Blaven lost patience.

Confusion made the spinster cross. She did not grudge Michael a few months of happiness, a taste of the sweetness of love. But why could he not have lost his heart to an unwed girl, even one of the wild-maned harlots who roved about the bothies and drove the ministers to distraction with their flouncing, pagan ways? She might have excused him such an irreverent fling. She could not, however, condone adultery. The affair might ruin the life left him and bring her – yes, she was selfish enough to consider it – condemnation in the eyes of the parish.

Michael was quick to sense that his aunt was not to be won round and took himself early to his room. Miss Blaven sat up late by the kitchen fire and, when the time came for her finally to retire, softly opened the door of her nephew's room. He had, of course, gone. The half-open window told its own tale.

There was no sleep for the spinster of Preaching Friar that night. It was after four o'clock before she heard him return, by the kitchen door this time, and go stealthily upstairs. She contemplated challenging him there and then but concern for his health was still paramount and she put off until morning the inevitable confrontation.

It was after nine before he came down, clad in a thick, flowing dressing-robe. He was tousled and smug, and in search of breakfast.

Thinly she said, "You look well this morning, Michael."

"I am excellently well, Aunt."

"Perhaps all the doctors are wrong and night air agrees with invalids."

"Night air? What do you mean?"

"Please do not pretend."

He came swiftly from the door and kissed her on the brow.

She felt suddenly very old, separated from her nephew by a great gulf of years. His insouciance was no longer infectious. She did not respond to it with a lightening of the heart, only with an enormous sadness that he had reached a singular peak of experience from which God would cause him to topple. He had no more future, her poor, happy nephew, than a moth.

To hide her grief, she busied herself with crocks and kettle. She made him coffee and mutton ham and bannocks, while he sat uncertain and silent at the table. Upstairs, the day-maid was thumping bolsters and singing to herself, the sound cheerful in the rainy grey air of the morning. The fire crackled. Coffee-grains rattled in the roasting-pot.

At length Michael said, "Very well, Aunt, I'll not prevaricate or tell an untruth. Yes, I spent a night with Elspeth."

She did not face him. "Where?"

"At Moss House."

She whirled. "Within Moodie's house? Michael, how did you dare?"

"In the garden."

Janet Blaven shook her head. "What sort of insanity is it, Michael, that possesses you, that you would risk your health –"

"Damned be my health, Aunt! What health? I am not, at this moment, an invalid. I have the use of my limbs. I can still walk. How I choose to travel and who I choose to walk with –"

"Is she – is she your lover? Answer me."

"I will answer you, Aunt. Yes, Elspeth is my lover."

Miss Blaven plumped herself down on a wooden stool.

The kettle steamed gently on the hob and the coffee-jug steamed gently on the table. She had never known a man, never been loved as Michael loved the girl from Balnesmoor. Would it be right to deny him and send him away? No other course would separate Michael from Elspeth Moodie. Even that dire measure might not be sufficient now that he had joined with her! Miss Blaven was not blind to the power of physical passion.

Michael was beside her, all charm, all contrition.

"Aunt, I cannot help myself."

"You can," the woman said. "Oh, yes, you can help yourself."

"How long will I live?"

He had played the one card that would win the game for him. Never before had he asked that question of her; the timing of it was cruel.

"Elspeth Moodie cannot cure you, Michael."

"Do you not understand that it's no adventure, Aunt? I have sincerely lost my heart to her and will not, under the circumstances, have time to transform myself into a suffering swain. No, nor to find another girl who might ease the pain of denial."

"It seems that you have not been denied anything."

"I did not force or cajole her, you know."

"Young women are foolish, Michael. It's a man's place to –"

"Aunt, please, give me your blessing."

She glanced up, scowling. "Blessing! That I will not do, Michael. I know right from wrong, even if you do not."

"Is it right that I should be chosen to die?"

There was no true conviction in his tone. He was using the threat to blackmail her, to gain her sympathy and her collusion. Michael did not, in his heart, believe that he would die at all. He was still of an age when immortality seemed possible. Lungs rotting in his chest and fevers never far away – these were transient misfortunes But she knew the truth, better than anyone, better than poor, deluded, wilful Michael.

She got up from the stool.

"If you meet near Moss House, if you continue to cuckold the weaver, Michael, you might die sooner than you think."

"I will keep warm, I promise."

"God rest you, Michael! Do you think a scarf and a wool vest will protect you from the fury of a deceived husband? Particularly a dour, proud man like Jamie Moodie? It's not night vapours that might terminate your life, it's shot from a gun or a club upon the head."

"Come now, Aunt Janet, you cannot expect me to believe that Moodie –"

"I care not what you believe, Michael. I speak the truth. Moodie might well kill you. She's a young wife, he an aging man. Jealousy might lead him to murder."

Michael laughed uneasily. "This is not a silly play, Aunt."

"I only wish that it was, Nephew."

He seated himself on the table, close to her. "Do you really suppose that Moodie would do such a thing?" and then answered his own question. "You know, I suppose he might. If Elspeth was mine, my wife, and another man – Yes, indeed, I do see what you mean."

"You may be prepared to die for love, Michael, but if you die one day sooner than the Good Lord intends then it will be at Moodie's hand. And your lady love will have to suffer all the consequences."

"What shall I do? I'll not give her up."

"Not even for her sake?"

"She, I believe, would not want it. Elspeth is aware of the dangers. Probably more than I am."

"Does she know that you have an illness?"

"Of course not."

"So it's a matter of caution and duplicity, of which, it appears, you have now made me a part," said Miss Blaven.

"I will not involve you, Aunt."

"Bring her here."

"What?"

"Bring her here; or, rather, I will bring her here. I will strike up a tea-taking sort of acquaintance with the young woman. She may come here as often as prudence permits."

"How often?"

"Not more than once in each week."

"It's not –"

"Her visits will be undertaken with caution and some subtlety. If we have good fortune, Moodie will not suspect my social advances. I wonder if he has any inkling that you stay here with me."

"Elspeth says that he does not."

"So much the better."

"Aunt, I feel awfully guilty about involving you in this deception."

"It's rather too late for guilt, Michael."

"I do not wish to seem ungrateful, Aunt, but I need to be alone with –"

"I will leave you with her, never fear."

"For how long, and how often?"

"Michael," the woman snapped, "this is not a contract. Is it not enough that I've agreed to help you in making assignations of which I do not – be clear on the point – do not approve?"

"Yes, Aunt, of course it is."

"No more nocturnal prowlings."

"I promise. When will I see Elspeth again?"

"As soon as it can be decently arranged. I will call on her this afternoon."

"You are," Michael kissed her on the cheek, "a most marvellous aunt."

"No, Michael." She would not be charmed, not today. "No, I'm a fool, a sentimental old fool."

"This afternoon?"

"Yes."

Jamie Moodie's mill stretched beyond the base of the auld brig at the Loup o' Kennart and occupied a great narrow step on the west bank of the Lightwater. It had not long retained the appearance of a new building for moss, dampness, and soot coughed from the cottage chimneys had rapidly aged its stones and timbers. Inside the wood-floored, low-beamed rooms the air was clotted with flecks of wool in varying states of density, wreathed by smoke from warming-stoves and strong with the stench of the grease with which the mobile parts of the mules and carding devices were lagged. The separate chambers were not partitioned but, thanks to contour and construction, stepped down two or three feet, each descending from the other as if the whole place were trying to steal into the river to lave away the lather of ceaseless activity.

At the mill's high end was a lade of stone and logs which trapped a coil of the Lightwater and diverted it into a race across which was bedded a single large water-wheel. The wheel provided only a portion of the power required to rotate the axles and spindles within, for Weaver Moodie was not sufficiently confident of innovation to dispense with hand-jennies.

The weaving of the cloths was done on handlooms attended by craftsmen. They were paid, as in domestic arrangement, by the finished piece. The men who crouched over the looms had been culled from villages all across the Lennox and had trudged to sign their names on Moodie's book in the belief that he would somehow protect them against the inevitable sag in the trade that would occur when the war against the French was over. Many had worked for Moodie in the past so now the mill-owner offered them an attractive shelter, a sense of community, in addition to ready work for wives and children. Happily they traded pride for convenience, exchanged the bondage of paying rent to a laird for the privilege of being tied to James Simpson Moodie, all under one roof, all congregated in the beetle-browed oblong cottages that flanked the road above the mill.

Moodie had two managers, experienced agents who had been with him for many years. Mr Scarf was responsible for acquiring substantial crops of wool, for making sure that it was packed briskly to Kennart and properly stored in the 'dumping-den', a wooden shed of considerable volume which leaned out from the mill gable like a fallen buttress. Mr Rudge was manager of the mill itself. He had an office perched above the wool store that was reached by a flight of rickety steps. Scarf spent most of his year upon the road. But Rudge was confined to Kennart now and missed his travelling. He was much under James Moodie's eye and detested the crowded hamlet and enforced association with the vulgar herd. He was, however, exceedingly well paid for his suffering and was not, thank God, required to actually reside in the God-blighted place but maintained his house in Harlwood in high bachelor style.

It was not Rudge but McAlpin, his clerk of accounts, who first spotted the ruffians.

McAlpin was a youngish man, skinny and short in the leg, with dark hair, thin lips and a pair of sharp brown eyes. He hailed from Lenzie and had had an Academy education and had earnestly sought a position in Mr Moodie's enterprise. He inordinately admired his employers. He was industrious and respectful and placed himself firmly on the side of gentlemen. In course of time he hoped that he might ascend to the position which Mr Rudge now held or, if fortune smiled on him, that he might set up a manufactory on his own account.

On that particular afternoon McAlpin was not at his desk but had sought a breath of fresh afternoon air by walking to the mill-head room to collect the cloth tallies from the previous day's labour. It was more customary for the tallies to be delivered by a boy but McAlpin liked to bully the overseer, Slade, who was twice his age and size but had no intelligence to speak of. Having exercised both his legs and his tongue, McAlpin returned to the office steps, the tallies neatly folded in his left hand like a spray of paper flowers. He had climbed to the little landing by the door of the offices and paused to look down at Kennart from this perch, to enjoy the proprietorial feeling that it gave him, when the pony-cart hove over the brow of the hill on the Drymen road and came down into the mill community.

There was nothing unusual in travellers making use of the road between Drymen and Balnesmoor. But there was something about the couple, a man and a woman, with the laden cart which made McAlpin lean his stomach against the guarding-rail and watch more intently.

The woman was larger than the pony, near enough, a great squat lump, wrapped in shawls. She was seated upon the cart's edge with a rope-rein in her hand, balancing the long two-wheeler against the pyramid of sacks, tubs and boxes that towered behind her. She wore a strange hat, oval-brimmed, of dyed straw and, even as McAlpin observed the entry into Kennart, she lifted from her lap a flask and sucked from its neck like a calf at the teat.

At the pony's head was a man on foot, a tiny clay pipe jutting from his mouth, and his shoes - shoes, not pattens, McAlpin noted - flapping from broken straps. It seemed almost as if the fellow were dancing, coming down the hill, crimping the loose shoes to his feet, dancing and shuffling as mad folk do. He was clad in a pea-jacket of Amsterdam blue.

The couple obviously were not vagabonds or trouble-makers. McAlpin, however, immediately marked them as town folk. His eyes narrowed with dislike and suspicion. He watched the cart trundle down into the muddy dip at the heart of the mill-hamlet and halt there. Puffing, the woman hoisted her bulk from the board while the man tied the pony-rope to the road's only hitch-rail, a slat nailed to a stump by the earthen walk at the cottage doors. The man ambled to the woman's side, put his arm around her waist and kissed her on the cheek.

Behind the pair, four old women and a young girl lumbering in the last weeks of a pregnancy came up the path from the riverbank with washing-baskets under their arms. The wives stopped, stared at the cart then moved on more quickly, chattering with excitement. Four or five very small children had materialised on the earthen walk and the sly, shy faces of others were visible in half-open doors. Strangers inevitably attracted attention in the newly-hatched community of Kennart. It was time, McAlpin decided, to report what he had seen to Mr Rudge before word leaked into the mill building and looms and spindles were abandoned as the workers flocked out to see what treasures the tubs and sacks contained. The accountant-clerk let himself into the office. But the manager's desk was bare, the chair behind it unoccupied. McAlpin returned to the stairs to resume his observation of the strangers.

Possibly they had come here, innocently enough, to seek work. Somehow McAlpin doubted it. They had not the servile manner of servants or field-workers, nor the cocky conceit of a craftsman and his lady. They behaved as if they intended to make purchase of the place. The woman pulled from the flask, wiped her mouth on her sleeve and passed the flask to the man who toasted the four corners of Kennart, grinning, before he drank.

Anger welled in McAlpin's chest. He flung himself down the stairs, shouting, "You there! I say, you there!"

The couple, arms linked like lovers, were strolling towards the mill head, ignoring the crowd of children and women who had crept up to the back of the cart to prod at the sacks in curiosity.

"You. Stop where you stand."

Chin thrust out pugnaciously, the accountant-clerk pranced towards the strangers who, still with arms linked, waited without a shred of surprise at being thus accosted.

"No pedlars here wi'out permission," McAlpin cried.

"Sir, we're no' pedlars," said the man.

The wives were pecking about the cart like pullets now and the enormous woman glanced over her shoulder and emitted a soft, deep, warning growl, like a mastiff.

"What are you then?" McAlpin demanded. He was dwarfed by the strangers, by the woman more than the man, but had become used to looking upward at folk and was not daunted by the weight mustered against him. "What do ye seek in our mill?"

"We're provision merchants, sir," said the woman.

"Provisions? Damned if you're not pedlars!"

"Is there a law agin sellin' here, a law we've not heard about, sir?" said the woman.

Attracted by the noisy conversation and by the sight of somebody squaring up to wee McAlpin, who was much detested by the Kennart folk, the wives made a ring about the strangers. Already, even then, there was an air of magnetism between the women and the merchants.

The nearest shop was four miles uphill, in Balnesmoor. It was a weary trail for the wee luxuries that made long hours of toil at the looms worthwhile. Besides, the cart was whacked high and there was from it, so more sensitive noses claimed, a delicious effluvium of pickled herring and salted bacon. Unlike the farmers and their hands the weavers had no beasts to slaughter and no meal to grind here in Kennart; a man could not eat a blanket nor a length of kilt-cloth. Money was the tangible product of the looms, money that could be exchanged for provender and for drink. Now here was a cart groaning with good things and only bloody McAlpin to stand between them and the pleasures of purchase.

"Law!" said McAlpin. "When the manager's no' here, I'm the law in Kennart."

"Ha-ha!" cracked somebody in the crowd. "Ha-ha-ha!"

McAlpin pretended not to hear the jackass jibe.

"An' where, sir, would the manager be?" the man asked.

"In the privy," came an answer from the crowd.

McAlpin's face burned. He did not quite know how to cope with such reasonable behaviour. So far the strangers had done nothing except tie up their pony-cart.

"You, lad." The accountant-clerk singled out one of the older children with a stab of his forefinger. "Run this instant to the forge and fetch the smith."

Both a shoe-smith and a mechanical expert, William Baynham was one of the new breed of Vulcans who had taught himself to cope with the latest devices of industry and, his fears to the contrary, had found more than enough work in Kennart to keep him in red meat and whisky. The forge was separated by the bridge from the cottages, set on a shoulder of ground above the lade stream. Baynham was James Moodie's 'constable', too tall, too strong and too brutal to brook opposition. If there was a brawl, Baynham was summoned to disperse the culprits and usually managed to break the odd finger or wrist in the sorting. If there was recalcitrance within the manufactory, it was Baynham who appeared at Rudge's side, a great glowering threat to back the manager's commands. Everybody in Kennart, including McAlpin, lived in awe of the smith.

The boy, six years old at most, went off like a cat. He would not, of course, venture within thirty yards of the open door of Baynham's forge, with its hot fire and black-horned anvil, but would yell out Mr McAlpin's instruction from a safe and respectful distance. The strangers, it appeared, were not familiar with the threat that the smith implied and the crowd of females and children did not for the moment sidle back, though they would be fast enough on their feet when Baynham stepped over the gates and tramped on to the street. Until that occurrence, McAlpin and the newcomers appeared quite prepared to do nothing.

Disconcerted by the strangers' silence, McAlpin in a deceptively friendly tone asked, "What do you have on your cart?"

"Herring. Trotters. Hard apples." It was the fat woman who deigned to reply. "Provisions for the store."

"Store? A store here? Hah, ye'll need to think again. There'll be no merchanting hereabouts. Mister Moodie'll never stand for it."

"We'll see," said the woman.

"Where is Mister Moodie?" said the man.

"Mister Moodie is up in his house in Balnesmoor. He'll not be at the beck an' call o' the likes of you."

The woman glanced at the man, who extracted the clay pipe from his mouth and spat, quite delicately, on the cobble that lay between McAlpin's shoes.

McAlpin jerked back while the womenfolk in the gathering sniggered.

The cry went up from the little boy racing back from the bridge-end, "*He's a-comin'.*"

The crowd shrank back, isolating McAlpin, the merchant-pedlars and the pony-cart.

Baynham wore a flapping leather apron and short wide shirt untaped to show an expanse of matted chest flushed by the forge fire. His hair curled with sweat and his eyes seemed to have a coal in each pupil. In one hand he carried the brass-studded plough-trace with which he meted out punishment when he was so instructed by Mr Rudge. Baynham, however, was not well pleased at being called away from twisting with tongs and a hand-vice a flat bar that he had spent a half-hour patiently nurturing to blood-red heat.

McAlpin licked his lip. "Mister Rudge isn't here. He left me t' look after the offices."

Baynham said nothing.

"These vagabonds'll not leave the road," said McAlpin.

"Aye, for what're ye wantin' me?"

"To – to remove them."

Baynham considered. He towered over the accountant-clerk, who managed only by the most strenuous effort of will to hold his ground, while the trace brushed and brushed back and forth restlessly against the thick leather hem of the apron.

"Remove them where?"

"O'er the bridge'll do fine," said McAlpin.

The smith stepped past the clerk and extended his right hand, the studded trace hanging from it like the hide of a flayed felon.

"Get on the cartie an' ride awa'," Baynham said, quietly, to the strangers.

It was the woman, who in bulk if not strength was nearly the smith's equal, who stepped forward. She protruded her stomach and breasts as she drew in her breath. "We'll move for no man, smith."

"Then I'll throw yon cartie in the water."

"An' if you do, m' mannie, ye'll be followin' it downstream e'er night falls," the woman said.

"For why?"

"For the reason, smith, that Mister Moodie'll discharge you from his service afore ye can suck three breaths," said the woman.

Baynham hesitated.

"Move them, Baynham. I'm givin' ye an order," McAlpin shrieked.

Baynham had more sense than the clerk. The couple had invoked the name of the highest power in the little kingdom above the Lightwater and Baynham would not take action against it, not on the word of an inky wee pipsqueak.

He shook his head. "I'm thinkin' we'll wait for Mister Rudge."

Stepping close to his woman's shoulder, the stranger said, "Bide with us for a while an' I'll give a solemn oath we'll sit quiet on the cart an', except for waterin' the pony, make no claim from the property. No, nor endeavour to press trade wi' the spinners or weavers or their spouses."

Baynham nodded; a solution.

McAlpin said, "Sit quiet for how long?"

"Until a message can be taken to Mister Moodie," the woman said.

"What message could ye be havin' for a gentleman like Mister Moodie?" said McAlpin.

McAlpin sensed in the pair the sort of implacable power that he craved. It was sufficient to give the clerk serious pause. Baynham, whose simple brute mind easily grasped such simple brute issues, glowered at him.

"Let a laddie tak' the message. Let Mister Moodie deal wi' them," said Baynham, sensibly but with a hint of threat.

McAlpin brooded for a moment. The crowd of onlookers hung on his decision. He spun round on his heel, looking down to the path behind which the earth privies were situated. He had the feeling that Mr Rudge had gone off somewhere. Perhaps he had taken one of the younger girls out to the sheds for a lesson in commercial diplomacy. McAlpin did not approve but he put his prudishness aside when it came to Mr Rudge and told himself that it was a necessary part of privilege.

He sighed. "Fetch me Laurence," he told the six-year-old runner and the little boy started off for the carters' den on the lane by the Drymen roadway where Mr Laurence and his horses would be found.

McAlpin gestured towards the pony-cart. "You'll not shift from there."

"Not 'til Mister Moodie gets here," said the stranger.

"Aye, you're fair sure o' yourself on that score," said McAlpin. "Now, what is this famous message?"

"Tell Mister Moodie," said the woman, "that Bell Harper has arrived in Kennart."

"Is that it all?"

"Bell Harper: the name will be enough."

A peculiar confluence of circumstances made deception easy by distracting James's attention from the woman from Preaching Friar who had turned up in his drawing-room unannounced. Tolland fetched the master from the library before sending a maid upstairs to bring the mistress from her room. James came at once to the drawing-room and introduced himself to the upright, respectable lady and asked what he might do for her, asked with a certain restrained suspicion.

"I have come," said Miss Blaven, "to enquire if your wife might care to take tea with me."

James nodded. He had no objection to such a thing. But the woman seemed to believe that the invitation required an explanation. "I have been meaning to call upon your wife for some months now. My nephew, my brother's child, resides with me from time to time, however, and demands, as boys will, a great deal of me. It's refreshing, is it not, Mister Moodie, to have youthful exuberance about one in later life?"

James seemed oblivious to the implications that lurked behind the remark. He nodded again. He had heard of Janet Blaven, for even in Harlwood she was considered not a little eccentric, though she was not 'sinister' in any manner and attended kirk regularly. He had seen her there, in the high pew tucked away to the west of the pulpit, but had never addressed a word to her until that afternoon.

"I thought," Miss Blaven went on, "that perhaps Mistress Moodie might care to give me her company on occasional afternoons, particularly during the dull season, provided that the weather remains clement and the road betwixt Moss House and Preaching Friar is not rimed with ice or snow. The long wintry afternoons can be so tedious, can they not, sir?"

Weaver Moodie agreed.

"Is your wife at home, Mister Moodie?" the woman asked.

"She's resting in her room. She has been sent for and will be with us presently, I'm sure," said Moodie. "I feel certain she will welcome your kind invitation, since she does find it wearyin' to be stuck in the house all day long when the winter's with us."

"We shall take tea early, in order that she might be home before dusk," said Miss Blaven.

"Is your nephew with you at present?" said James.

Miss Blaven did not hesitate. She lied glibly. "Oh, no. Not at present. I expect when he grows older I shall not see him at all. He will forget his ancient aunt."

Before Elspeth could enter the drawing-room, and before James could enquire further about 'the nephew', Tolland knocked on the drawing-room door and entered.

"Aye, what is it?" James asked the steward.

Tolland advanced, stooped, whispered into James's ear.

At that moment Elspeth, flushed and uncertain, appeared at the drawing-room door. She glanced nervously at the woman and then at James. Had her love and love-making been revealed by the spinster from Preaching Friar? Elspeth's guilt increased as James shot from his chair, features contorted and complexion ashen. Muttering an apology he rushed from the room, quite oblivious to Elspeth's presence by the doorway. Anxiously Tolland followed his master.

Nonplussed by her husband's behaviour Elspeth drew a deep, steadying breath.

"You are, I believe, Miss Blaven." Elspeth came forward. "I have heard much good of you, though we haven't met before."

The woman studied her, and did not return her smile.

Elspeth said, "I ask you to pardon my husband. It's apparently a matter of urgent business – at the mill, I imagine – which has called him away so suddenly."

Miss Blaven inclined her head to acknowledge the polite apology. She still had not relaxed and seemed to Elspeth as prickly as an old hedgehog. Elspeth seated herself on a little satin divan.

Miss Blaven said, "I did not come, in fact, to speak with your husband, though I should have been quite justified in doing so in the light of the circumstances."

"What circumstances are those?"

The woman tutted and made a gesture as if brushing crumbs from her sleeve.

"Young woman, do you know, I'm Michael's aunt; old but neither blind nor deaf."

"I see," said Elspeth.

"Devil take chit-chat, girl," said Miss Blaven and, in a tone of voice that permitted no argument or interruption, outlined the scheme she had devised for furthering the affair.

Elspeth listened, hardly able to believe her ears.

Miss Blaven concluded, "Can you be discreet?"

"Yes. Oh, yes."

"Will you be expected to take a maid with you?"

"Sometimes, perhaps. But I can drive the gig myself an' have done so once or twice."

"You may come to my house then, but no oftener than once in the week. It would be unwise to arouse your husband's suspicions unnecessarily. One afternoon each week must suffice."

"Why do you do this?" Elspeth asked.

"Not for you. For my nephew. Out of love for Michael." Still the spinster was unrelenting. "I do not approve of deceit and connivance, and I would have no part in it if it were not for the fact that my nephew, that Michael – that he believes himself to be in love with you. Tell me, do you love him?"

"I do. I love him with all my heart."

"It is not just a game, hmmm?"

"Certainly not," said Elspeth. "I am not that kind of person, Miss Blaven."

"Ah, but it seems that you are. If you were not in some measure 'that kind of person' then I would not be on this unfortunate mission."

Elspeth opened her mouth to protest but found that she could not deny the accusation. She must, at least, be honest in sin.

It had not before occurred to her that she was already damned in the eyes of decent society, that there could be no forgiveness for what she had done, nor for what she was about to do. It would be furtive, a thing of stealth, but if loving could be found no other way then she had no alternative but to square herself, to admit what she had done. She had salve for the wounded soul, however, in the secret that she shared only with her husband, that she had come to Michael as a virgin, almost a bride, and that her marriage was no better than a contract on paper. She felt more like an errant, wilful daughter than an erring and unfaithful wife.

"What," said Elspeth, "what will happen in the future?"

"The future?"

"What will become of us?"

"Let the future look after itself, child. Take what is offered and be grateful. Put tomorrow entirely out of mind."

"I'm half afraid," said Elspeth.

"So you should be." Miss Blaven glanced towards the drawing-room door. "It seems that your husband has gone out."

"In that case we will have an opportunity to talk," said

Elspeth, "if you have the time to spare; and the inclination."

Miss Blaven sighed. "I suppose we had better get to know each other. Yes. Is tea to be offered?"

"Tea is to be offered," said Elspeth, and rang the little silver bell.

The stairs shook beneath the woman's bulk. She seemed barely able to squeeze herself between the rails and toiled slowly upwards as to a gibbet. James waited on the landing by the office's open door while the woman laboured, assisted by an occasional indecorous shove from the man who claimed to be her husband.

The abrupt, tempestuous arrival of the owner had dispersed the crowd, sent them slinking away to their homes, but now they crouched in doorways and by the windows, watching.

McAlpin had taken the rein of James's lathered horse and had hitched it by the pony-cart while Baynham, not daft enough to leave the strangers unguarded, hung about by the bridge-end, watching too.

As he had whipped and spurred the big horse down the road from Balnesmoor, James's mind had been in turmoil. Reason wrestled with imagination, hope with terrible fear. He had spared no time to question the boy who had carried the message up from the mill, except to ensure that it was indeed a woman who had delivered it and that the woman waited, in the flesh, at Kennart.

Divested by shock of all aloofness James had clattered the mount over the bridge and had flung himself from the saddle as soon as he spotted the strangers seated on the back of the loaded cart.

"WHO ARE YOU?" he shouted so violently that his voice could be heard within the mill building even above the din of the looms. "DAMN ME, WILL YOU ANSWER!"

"Do ye not recall me, Mister Moodie?" the fat woman said.

"I've never seen you before in my life."

"Aye, sir, but ye have. Long, long ago. In Glasgow."

"Never, I say."

"The years have takit their toll, right enough. But well do I recall how ye came t' see my friend Bell Harper behind the old Tontine. She was fair smitten wi' ye, Mister Moodie. She talked of her weaver Jamie night after night while we lay in our beds."

The woman spoke with a sly wistfulness, softly. But McAlpin's ears were pricked like a fox's and James believed that the stranger's speech could be heard by everyone for miles around, like an echo carrying out of a cavern.

He was relieved, however, that the strangers came only from Glasgow and not from some black limbo beyond the grave. He had seen Bell dead and he had seen Bell buried and all that truly remained of her was the child, his child, his wife.

"What nonsense is this?" he said.

"It canna be nonsense, sir, when she left a bairn behind her, a bairn that's livin' still."

Before James could protest that he did not know what the woman was talking about, the man intervened. "Be that as it may, dearest, I'm certain Mister Moodie has no time t' spare for mullin' over the olden days, not here an' not now."

"What do you want in Kennart?"

"We've come with a purpose. Mutually beneficial."

"For money, is it? To extract money?"

The fellow seemed hurt by the suggestion. "Mutually beneficial, sir. If ye can spare a moment, in a bit of privacy, we'll tell ye what the purpose is."

James hesitated, then said quietly, "We'll talk in the room at the top of the staircase."

The room reeked of Rudge's scented tobacco and vibrated with the jerking engines in the long building to which it was attached. The sounds of industry were muffled but the thrill of the machines was transmitted through the boards. James closed the door at once and dropped the latch. He stepped to the window and looked down into the road. Cottars had crawled out again, whispering among themselves, agog, watching the high office intently, watching the staircase, watching the door as if they expected him to fly out and soar above their heads, scaled and horned and breathing fire.

Uninvited, the fat woman seated herself upon McAlpin's stool while her man stood by her side, pipe in mouth, hands in pockets. James stood behind the table, arms folded imperiously.

"Speak your piece, packman," he said.

"We're no packmen, sir," said the man. "I am named

George Cunningham an' this lady is my goodwife, Trina. We are Godfearin' citizens of the great city of Glasgow an' there, this many a year, we've served the populace as provision merchants and victuallers."

"What of this woman?" said James. "What was her name? Harper? Is she also in the victuallin' trade?"

The fat woman snorted derisively. "Bell Harper's been dead for many years, as well you know, Mister Moodie."

"I know nothing of the sort," said James. "What makes you suppose I'd ever heard of this girl before today? Candidly, Mistress Cunningham, I have no recollection of her at all. Nor of you, for that matter."

"I'm sure you recall the backs o' the Tontine well enough, Mister Moodie, since you spent such a deal o' time waitin' there for Bell to finish work an' come to you."

James was well aware of how he was being manipulated. He dared not relax, even though his heart was pounding and his chest constricted. If he showed even a trace of fear the Cunninghams would, like mongrel dogs, be at his throat in an instant. At all costs he must appear to have the upper hand. He thought of Elspeth back up the hill in the security of Moss House. She was so like her mother, so like Bell Harper. Fine clothes and fashionable grooming could not disguise the physical resemblance. There was little doubt that the Cunningham woman had seen Elspeth in Glasgow and had recognised her. To see Elspeth was to see Bell. Though there could be no shred of proof of his daughter's true identity, the implication of the Cunninghams' arrival was terrifying. Accusation alone would be sufficient to bring him down.

James stepped to the mark. "You claim, Mister Cunningham, to have a purpose in seeking me out. Let's hear of it without more ado, please."

"We've a mind to set up a shop," Cunningham said, "in the pure fresh air of the country. Kennart seems to be a spot ideal."

"There are no vacant accommodations in Kennart at present."

"Any old bit of a shed or barn will suit," said Cunningham. "We'll take it upon ourselves to make it neat an' habitable."

"I'm sure, sir, you'll find us a dry corner, for auld times' sake," said the woman.

"I see," said James. "You claim that your purpose would benefit me, but I see no benefit in the settin' up of a shop. Am I to charge you rental for the premises or to draw a certain percentage from the profits of your venture?"

"Findin' a shop at their doors will keep the labourers contentit," said Cunningham. "It'll prevent them wanderin' far from the mill place in search o' provender, fallin' into the temptations places the likes o' Balnesmoor offer."

James would hardly have called Balnesmoor the Gomorrah of the north, though, by the lights of some in the Lennox, Fintry or Balfron might qualify.

"See, there's the benefit," said the woman.

James said, "Hardly! Kennart's workers have managed well enough so far without a shop. Besides, if I wished to have a shop in Kennart I would open one on my own account."

"We have experience. We have sold foodstuffs an' fuels, all sorts o' things, for twenty years."

"In Glasgow," James said. "Kennart's requirements are not the same as those of the city."

"Bellies growlin' for tasty sup," said Cunningham, "sound the same everywhere."

How far would he have to push them before they raised the dreadful name of Isobel Harper again, until the woman thrust more 'recollections' at him, until Elspeth's relationship was exposed? James closed his eyes for a moment. It was not his heart that was pounding now but his head, a swelling, stabbing pain.

"What do you propose to sell in this shop of yours?"

"Everythin' needed by the folk hereabouts."

"For example?" said James.

Immediately the woman rattled off a list of foodstuffs and goods that seemed endless. James allowed her to indulge her fantasy, taking note of the fact that she included beer and spirits among the pies and candles, cheeses and smoked fish. He could not imagine such edible delicacies suiting the palates of his labourers but he could, with ease, imagine their delight at having drink available a stone's throw from the mill.

"How will you purchase all this stock?" he asked, when, at length, the woman had completed her inventory.

"We've money," said Cunningham. "Capital."

"Indeed!" James said. "Sufficient to furnish such an ambitious scheme?"

"We also have trusted friends from whom credit can be obtained," said Cunningham.

"See, Mister Moodie, there's nothin' to prevent it," said Trina Cunningham.

"But yet, where is my benefit?"

"We'll pay a tithe in the stead of a rent," said Cunningham. "The sum of one shilling in each twenty."

"Two shillings," James said.

"One shilling an' sixpence."

"Two," James insisted. "Not a farthin' less will I accept."

The woman reached up her hand and tugged on the pea-jacket and the man capitulated. "Aye, you shall have your two shillings, Mister Moodie."

"Who will keep the account, however?" James said.

"Has the account not been kept?" said the woman sleekly.

"I do not understand your meaning, Mistress Cunningham."

"We'll be keepin' the account," said the woman.

James laughed mirthlessly. "It would hardly be fair to ask or expect me to trust you quite so far."

"We're reliable," said the woman. "More reliable than many another."

James sensed that the name of Bell Harper was on the tip of the fat woman's tongue again and blurted out his agreement to prevent the utterance. Never before had he buckled under less pressure, given in to such woeful terms. The Cunninghams had him in flight, and were increased in arrogance because of it.

"When – when would you wish to commence?"

"We brought our pony an' our cart, as you saw," said Cunningham. "Show us the accommodation ye have in mind for us an' we'll have crusty pies and soused herring scentin' the air by dinner-time tomorrow."

But the woman would not let James Moodie surrender so easily. "Aye, Bell was fair fond o' pickled herrin', as you'll no doubt recall."

James's temper broke. "You're here only under sufferance," he snapped. "I've given you your wretched terms. I'll see to it that you have your damned cottage too. Now hear what I have to say. My stipulation. Hear it well or I'll order my blacksmith to burn you out and break your pony's back into the bargain. Never in my hearing will either of you mention Bell Harper's name again."

"I thought the name meant nothin' to you," the woman said.

"Never, *never* again."

Cunningham patted his wife's shoulder. "Trust us, sir. The name you abhor will never be breathed betwixt our lips from this moment forth. Is that not so, my dearest?"

"Aye, that's so." Trina Cunningham got ponderously from the chair, supported by her husband. "Now, Mister Moodie, if you'd be good enough t' show us our bit corner, I'll set out my bakin' boards an' griddles in preparation for tomorrow."

Cunningham offered his hand.

To his eternal shame, James Simpson Moodie shook it – and sealed the devil's bargain.

The boot-plate by the hearthside in Sinclair's cottage was made of hard brass, polished to gleam like gold. Firelight shone on it and on the copper kettle which was used only to make medicines, and on the miniature warming-pan which had been a bridal gift to Aileen from her grandmother but was now no more than another pretty object to burnish. Lachlan Sinclair used the boot-plate carefully, waggling off the half-calf boots and setting them precisely on the board by the fire where they would dry gradually without flaking and stiffening and without shedding dirt upon the whitened flagstones.

The grieve sat back. Tonight he would welcome a taste of whisky, done with water and sugar perhaps, for he felt drained by the long evening in the company of the new laird. Rent books, stud books, tallies of yields from plantings, records of wool sales, beef sales and milkings; it was the grieve himself who had inaugurated the keeping of accurate records so could not complain at the new laird's fascination with facts and figures. He was surprised at the nimbleness of Randall Bontine's brain, however, for the laird was full of shrewd and penetrating questions.

But there had been another happening that afternoon which was of equal significance to Lachlan Sinclair. He had been approached by Mister Gilbert with a suggestion that he might care to leave Ottershaw and accompany his, Gilbert's, family on their exodus to pastures new.

"Where are these new pastures, sir?"

"I haven't found land to purchase yet," Gilbert had answered. "But when I do, Lachlan, I'll come to you again and ask for a decision."

Lachlan had been non-committal but the suggestion had set his thoughts racing. In fact he had already begun to wonder if his loyalty had ever really been to the lairds at all and not to the land itself. In prospect he could not imagine himself being comfortable anywhere else in the world.

He had his family to consider, however. What would become of Ottershaw under Randall? Would it, as Gibbie seemed to believe, quickly fall to ruin? So far he had seen few signs that Randall was a wastrel. If he went along with Mister Gilbert he would, of course, insist that places were found for his children, also for Matt and Anna. Thus would Matt be saved from the bad company of Pad Tomelty and Anna from the lascivious interest of the laird; or was he, perhaps, making too much of it?

He looked over at Aileen. She was busy with her needle, patching a pair of Sandy's breeks. Dearly would he have liked to share his worries with her but she would not understand the half of it and would only worry about matters that were, after all, man's business.

Lachlan Sinclair closed his eyes, though he was by no means drowsy, and turned the sundry anxieties over in his mind.

A few minutes later he was disturbed by a rap upon the door.

"Who can that be at such a late hour?" said Aileen.

The latch rattled and the door opened and Matt entered the kitchen. His cheeks were blushed and his eyes bright which suggested that he had been boozing, though he was far from inebriated. He tossed his hat on to the top of the chest by the door and came towards the fire, palms spread to soak up the heat. Matt needed no invitation, no welcome. Though relations with his father might be strained the home hearth and its comforts would never be denied him so long as his mother was alive.

Aileen was naturally delighted to see her son. She whisked away her bits of sewing and instantly bustled a cog of hot leek soup and a plate of bread and butter on to the table.

Carefully, Sinclair said, "Aye, so it's yourself, Matt. You're out and about at a late hour tonight."

"I took ale with McDonald an', since he was the worse o' it, felt obligated to see him safe up the hill to his door. I came down by the pine bridge, so I thought I'd call in t' visit Mam."

Pleased by her son's explanation, Aileen said, "You'll be hungry?"

"Famished."

"Have you not been home at all?" Sinclair asked.

"Anna'll feed my monkey," Matt replied, as if that was all the answer his father needed.

"Have you not spoken with your wife today?"

"She's not spoken wi' me," said Matt.

"She has news for you."

Matt glowered. "What news?"

"Tell him, Lachlan," said Aileen. "It's no secret, such good news."

"Anna's been 'made up'," said Sinclair.

"Made up t' what?"

"Picked for a house servant."

To his parents' consternation, Matt threw back his head and bellowed with laughter.

"I see no humour in it," said Sinclair at length.

"A domestic? Bloody Anna?" Matt hooted again. "God, she can hardly boil water wi'out floodin' the kitchen. She'll not last more than a week inside the big house, mark my words. Anna – a servant!"

"It's good advancement, Matt," said Aileen uncertainly.

"Aye, and you should not talk so disparagingly of your wife," said Sinclair. "If you have a poor opinion of her fitness it should be kept to yourself."

Still shaking his head in amusement at the notion of Anna let loose in Ottershaw, Matt seated himself at the table. His mother served him with soup, bread and a rasher of boiled ham. He fell to eating with relish. Aileen watched him fondly, frowning.

She said, "It'll be more money too, will it not, Lachlan?"

"Better wages than a dairy-lassie makes, certainly."

"Longer hours each day, though," said Matt. "Aye, wi' any luck I'll hardly see her at all."

"What a thing to be sayin' about your wife," Aileen chided.

Matt shrugged with apparent indifference. He lifted a slice of ham between his finger and thumb, folded it into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. "Is this the new laird's doin'?" he asked after a pause. "Is it him as wants her in the house?"

Sinclair chose his words with care. "Anna is only one of several."

'Who are the others, then?"

"Brigit Tomelty for one."

Once more Matt hooted with amusement. "By God, but he's keen, is Randall. Brigit'll have the bloody silver out from under Hunter's snitch, one piece at a time. Did you not think t' warn the man, Father, eh?"

"Brigit is a diligent worker," Sinclair said.

"Diligent on her back, right enough," Matt murmured.

"Enough!" said Lachlan Sinclair. "I'll not have that sort of talk in my house." He got to his feet. "It's late. When you've eaten your fill, you should be on your way home. You've a hard day's work ahead of you, if I'm not mistaken."

Matt wiped his mouth. "Aye, if the river stays low enough an' the bank soft, we'll be startin' shore-work the day after tomorrow."

"Are the props an' brakes all cut then?"

"Cut an' stacked for length," said Matt. "McDonald'll be sendin' for the horses."

"Has he told Craigie?"

"He has. Provided there's no heavy rain, the work'll be done by Saturday."

"I'll come round tomorrow. I wish to have a word with McDonald in any case," said Sinclair. A half-hour of his discussion with the laird had been devoted to the plantations. "It seems you'll be kept busy cuttin', if I can find a buyer."

"Cuttin' what?"

"The thirty-year acres," Sinclair said. "Three lots are to be sold. The value's about two thousand pounds sterling for each lot. Can we separate about twelve acres from each of the lots?"

"Aye, there's that an' more. The old laird was wise when it came to trees," Matt admitted. "He had the plantin's done for the sake o' the sons. Will Randall skin the whole forest?"

"Not him," said Sinclair. "He needs capital, though, since he has payments to make to the family."

"Is Gibbie departin'?" Matt asked.

"He'll be gone by Whitsun, I expect."

"Will you go wi' him?" said Matt.

Aileen, who had been removing the cogs from the table, froze over her task.

"What makes you suppose Mister Gilbert would want me?"

"He'd be daft if he didn't try to lure you awa' from Randall," said Matt. "You're the best damned grieve in Scotland, Da."

"Well, if Gibbie does propose it," said Sinclair, evasively, "I would have to give it much ponderin'."

"You'll never quit Ottershaw," said Matt.

Aileen Sinclair put one bowl into another and slowly straightened. She kept her back to the men and did not intrude, though she was dizzy with the desire to shout aloud that she wanted no other home but this one and no shift at her time of life.

"If, for the sake of hypothesis," said Sinclair, "I was offered the management o' Gilbert's estate, somewhere, would you come with us?"

"One grieve is all Gibbie'll need."

"There might be plantations."

"Plantations!" said Matt with derision. "Is that what you hope for me, Da, that I'll become a forester like Kenneth McDonald?"

"There are worse occupations."

"Nah, nah," said Matt. "I'm content where I am."

"It's yourself that has no ambition," said Sinclair.

"When I'm prepared, then I'll strike out for myself, but it'll not be on your coat-tails, Father."

"Strike out?"

Matt smiled, smugly, but would not be drawn further. He quickly brought the conversation back to the repair work which was pending on the banks of the Lightwater and distracted his father from further enquiry into his plans for the future.

Aileen took the cogs out to the tub by the back door and washed them in cold water. When she returned her husband and son were deep in discussion of estate work, so caught up that their enmities were forgotten.

She kissed her handsome son upon the brow, her husband on the cheek and went through to her bed leaving the men clacking until after midnight. She was disturbed by what she had heard but blissfully unaware of the gathering shadows that threatened them all.

One o'clock in the morning, Jacko shivering in his cage, the fire near out, the table littered with pots and crocks and a tangle of damp wash dumped on each of the room's four chairs; Matt snorted wryly at the notion of Anna under Hunter's thumb where her sluttish ways would earn her stick and, probably, speedy dismissal.

Though Matt had been out and about since six that morning he was not in the least weary nor daunted by the thought that he must rise again in four hours or so for another day's labour. He had not told his father and mother the whole truth about his doings that evening. He had not lugged McDonald home at all, though he had been, for a time, at the Ramshead.

Kneeling by the hearth Matt built up the dying fire for the morning, placing big resinous logs with care, as he would shore up the crumbling bank of the Lightwater. It gave him pleasure to shape the fire, thumbing small coal into the cracks. He sat back on his heels, watching smoke reek evenly from the ramp and purl up the chimney as thick and grey as a kirkman's prayer. Rising, he untangled the washing and hung the items one by one across the ropes that webbed the rafters and, that done, treated himself to a final dram of hill-run whisky from the green flagon hidden in the dresser. It had been months since he felt so relaxed and at ease with himself and he had no wish for the day to end. He fished Jacko down from the cage and. clasping the monkey as he would a baby, padded softly about the kitchen, crooning to the creature who, at this hour of the night, was passive and without playfulness.

Glass in hand, the capuchin in his arms, Matt made his pet a bowl of warm cornmeal mash and, seated in the box chair, fed Jacko from a spoon. With the door of the bedroom closed he could blot Anna from his thoughts, push away the droll prospect of having his wife dance for Randall Bontine.

Thinking of Brigit's advancement to house servant, however, made Matt grin. By God, if Bontine had searched the Lennox from stem to stern he could not have picked himself a less reliable servant, though Brigit might put Anna to shame when it came to neat work – aye, and to pleasuring a man in other ways too. A little stab of jealousy touched Matt's heart, not for Anna but for Brigit Tomelty who, this past three weeks, had given him more fun and more affection than ever his wife had done, tumbling in barns and hay sheds and along the backs, anywhere where they could find a modicum of privacy.

Cradled in Matt's arms Jacko had fallen fast asleep. Matt laid aside bowl and spoon, tenderly wiped the half-open mouth and little round chin with his knuckle, and settled back in the box chair, too considerate to disturb the wee creature.

When the time came for him to escape from Balnesmoor only Jacko and Brigit would accompany him on his travellings. Every other thing and person would be left behind without a qualm; his father, the cottage, the tedious job, everything that leeched away his happiness, including Anna.

Anna too would be abandoned.

Anna most of all.

In the meantime let Hunter suffer her laziness, and the laird, if he was fool enough, sniff about her skirts.

Matt no longer cared.

Henry Hunter had started his career as a pot-boy in the Ottershaw kitchens and had been footman, valet and butler before attaining the august position of steward to the Bontine household. He had never suffered under his master, Sir Gilbert, but had had his patience tried to its limit by the mistresses of the house.

The first wife of the laird had been reared in the Tartar school of housekeeping and applied herself to domestic economy with the meticulousness of a German mathematician. Hunter had endured the woman for the first two decades of his service and regarded her behaviour as the norm; lavishness in public, obsessional parsimony in private.

The second wife had been quite different, a bright, gay, personable woman, thorough but trusting, and not unduly concerned with the fate of the bones from the stock-pot. Her rule had been cut short by the arrival of Gibbie's wife, the dreaded Alicia who, within a couple of years, had wrested the House Book from her mother-in-law and drove the servants to distraction by quibbling about every hobnail, button and duster. It had taken all Hunter's diplomacy to prevent the servants melting away under Alicia; even Mrs Lacy, the cook, had threatened to pack her bags and depart on more than one occasion. It was very satisfying to see Alicia stripped of power on Mister Randall's return, to take such umbrage that she abandoned all her duties and left the mansion without a female head.

Hunter had never married and, unlike Tom Tolland at Moss House, did not play the rooster in the hen-run. It did not surprise the downy old steward, however, when Randall picked two girls and a young boy to add to the staff. What the new laird wanted was a clutch of servants that he could call his own, servants who would not go tattling to Mistress Alicia behind his back.

Dunn was to be trained as a valet and resided in the servants hall. Brigit Tomelty and Anna Sinclair, on the other hand, were to be hired as day-maids and released after six each evening t return to their homes. The boy was paid a pittance of two pound in the year and given one day off each month to go home to visi his mother in Blanefield. Brigit and Anna received five pound and dinners but got no allowance for clothing, being provide only with caps and aprons. Hunter would not have been sur- prised if he had had problems with Brigit Tomelty, though h kept a close eye on her, but it surprised him greatly when troubl stemmed from Anna Sinclair.

Anna had been in Ottershaw for just five weeks. It wa Friday morning, a quarter of an hour after her arrival whe Dunn's shrill voice commanded a pot of hot chocolate to b brought upstairs to the master's bedroom.

In the dining-room Gilbert, Alicia and three of their childre stiffened as the cry rang down from the laird's quarters to th west of the staircase that climbed from the main hall. Ann saw little of Mister Gilbert's menage. Hunter had shown he the tunnel-like stairs that coiled up from behind the table-line cupboard, stairs that she and Brigit must use to reach th library and the first-floor bedrooms.

"Chocolate, chocolate." Dunn loved the echo and im pression of authority it gave and the laird egged him on to le it rip and damn the solemnity of the bell. "Chocolate for th master."

Mrs Lacy already had the tray set and quickly poure boiling water into the silver pot, snapping shut the lid. Hunte was in the dining-room attending Mister Gilbert and his family but Anna needed no special instruction as she had performed the rite almost every morning for weeks now. She tucked the curve of the tray into her elbow and headed for the back stairs.

Above Anna the door to the first-floor corridor opened and Brigit appeared, cheeks smudged with soot, empty pail clanking in her fist.

"Brigit, go back. I'll never get through wi' you there," hissed Anna.

Brigit retreated, holding the door. Anna tilted the laden tray and cautiously edged past her friend.

Brigit whispered, "He's in the bedroom. An' wait 'til ye see what he's doin'."

"What's he doin'?"

"Half undressed."

"Eh?"

"Waitin' for you."

"What?"

Brigit shot her eyebrows high, sniggered, pursed her lips in a grotesque kiss then flounced off, letting the door close and causing Anna to dance forward into the corridor. Tutting under her breath, Anna hurried to the door of the bedroom, knocked and waited.

Dunn opened to her and she went in, making for the octagonal table by the window, her head demurely lowered. She was aware of Randall, seated on a queer wee stool close to the bed. For once, Brigit had not exaggerated. Anna placed the tray on the table, turned.

"Will I pour for you, sir?" she asked.

"If you would be so good," Randall grunted.

He had clenched his fingers under the edges of the stool and had extended his leg before him, raised near straight. From the ankle hung a wooden bucket – a plain, dairy-milk container – half-filled with sand. The handle of the container was of white rope and there was a second bucket close by with a gardener's trowel in it. Randall was clad in his shirt and what appeared to be knee-length underdrawers.

Anna stared. She could see the shape of him clear beneath the clinging material as he deliberately lowered the leg until the bucket touched the floor then, with another grunt, raised it steadily and evenly upward again.

Though the morning was cold and the fire in the grate smoked black after fresh setting, there was sweat on Randall's upper lip. Dunn watched with almost as much fascination as the girl, though he had witnessed the performance a dozen times or more in recent weeks.

"Are you wantin' another spoonful in there, Mister Randall?"

"Come now, lad, would you have me crack the bone?"

"Och, no, Mister Randall, but you're doin' fine," said Dunn with an easy familiarity which Anna found puzzling. "Up higher, sir, eh? Up an' down."

Randall dipped his leg, rested, then raised the bucket higher than before, tilting his hips until his back touched the side of the bed behind him. He was quivering with muscular exertion Sweat dripped from his brow. The long, cord-like muscles of his thigh and calf seemed to vibrate.

Dunn counted in a loud voice, "Ane, twa, three, fower, five, sax –"

The strain was too much. Randall sagged, letting the sand-bucket thud to the floor. He unhooked his ankle from the rope and fell back on to the unmade bed. He gave a great sigh, then propped himself on his elbows, and looked at Anna.

"Well, girl, are you going to pour my chocolate or are you waiting until it turns to ice?"

"Sorry, sir. Sorry."

She was trembling, as if she had shared his strenuous exercises. She was not mystified now. It had to do with the injury that made him walk so oddly. He was determined to bully the wasted flesh back to health.

Her fingers shook, the big cup chittered on the saucer as she took it to him. He made her wait, sizing her up, smiling.

"Taste it, girl," he said.

"What?"

"Taste it. Is it sweet enough?"

She juggled the saucer, lifted the cup and put her lips into the thick, dark liquid. It was sweet and appealing. She drank a little, watching the laird over the rim. In turn he watched her, amused.

"Aye, it's sweet, Mister Randall."

"Excellent!" he held out his hand and she gave him the cup.

Dunn had pulled away the sand-bucket and hauled it into corner of the room, indicating that the period of exercise was ver.

Anna turned towards the door.

"Wait."

She swung round.

He was holding out the chocolate-cup. "I recognise the taste f your lips. We've met before, have we not, before I went off o fight Napoleon?"

Anna did not reply.

He said, "Are you not the Cochran girl who used to frequent he woods above Kennart on hot summer evenings?"

"Aye, laird. My name was Cochran before I marrit."

"Do you not remember our meeting?"

"I – I remember it, sir."

Eyes hooded, he laughed. There was no malice in it. Much f the coldness, the cruelty which she, as a young girl, had emarked in him had softened away. Whether this was due to er maturity or to some change in him, Anna could not be ure. She was not afraid of him now, however. Her fingers had topped trembling. Somehow she had known that eventually hey would speak in this manner of the past.

"I did not imagine that one day you would be a maid in my ervice." Randall stretched his legs. "I did not imagine that I ould ever be laird of Ottershaw, for that matter."

He got to his feet, wincing a little, drank the chocolate in hree gulps and handed her the saucer and cup.

"I asked Hunter," he said. "In truth, I didn't remember our name. It's Sinclair now, is it not?"

"Aye, sir. I'm wed to the grieve's son."

Randall seemed uninterested.

"Am I t'go now, sir?"

"Presently." He motioned to Dunn who had already taken waistcoat and coat from a wooden cupboard and was flapping he garments to fill and air them. "There were two of you, ere there not? Another pretty girl; your sister?"

"She's wed to James Moodie, him as owns Kennart."

"Ah!" Randall exclaimed.

"She fell lucky," said Anna.

Randall was quick to take up the remark. "And you did ot? Being a servant in Ottershaw is not the same as being the dy of Moss House?"

"It's not, sir," said Anna. "Indeed, it is not."

Dunn brought forward the vest and coat and laid them across the bed-end.

"You had better go, both of you," Randall said. "I mus dress now and show my face about the policies."

Anna picked up the tray and headed for the door. She wa not embarrassed by Randall's questions but she was wary o her own loquacity and feared that she might misconstrue hi interest in her and overstep the mark, become too familiar to soon.

Dunn opened the door for her and let her out into th corridor.

She heard the laird say, "Wait for me in the stable yard Dunn. I'll be there presently."

"Will ye be wantin' a stick, laird?"

"Yes, alas. The cane."

Dunn came out of the bedroom and closed the door. H glanced at Anna and winked.

"He likes you," the boy said.

"How d' you –"

But there was no opportunity for Dunn to give a reply. A the corridor's end stood Mistress Alicia with a face like a vinegar sponge, a puling child hanging from each hand.

Dunn was off down the back stairs like a shot and Anna followed before she could be snared by the gaunt, acerbi woman and pumped for information on the state of the laird's health.

It did not take Pad Tomelty long to contact the Cunninghams and deliver occasional lots of illicit whisky to supplement thei stocks of mild and heavy beer. Licence would be require when the couple openly came to selling wines and spirits bu the Lennox folk had no scruples about diddling the Excise Indeed, the only people who might be tempted to drop a wor to the King's Officer were the landlords of other drinkin establishments but they were too wary of Pad Tomelty to d him harm. True, the stiff-necked McAlpin might have had a shot at spiking the Glaswegians' guns but McAlpin wa amazed to discover that Mr Rudge approved of the Cunninghams and thought it a sign of progress that Kennart shoul have a shop of its own. What McAlpin did not know was tha

Rudge had been taken aside by James Simpson Moodie and told, in no uncertain terms, that the Cunninghams were to be given every possible assistance and encouragement, including free use of mill labour to improve their raw, ill-knit cottage on the shoulder of Rowan Hill.

Rowan Hill was hardly more than a knoll which marked the back of Kennart but the pathway was wide enough to take George Cunningham's pony-cart and bear the foot traffic which daily increased as the air became impregnated with the aroma of gingerbread and hot meat pies and the coffee-berries which Trina craftily roasted in a copper pan on an open fire outside the front door.

The cottage itself was a single-room affair with a half-loft, floored for a bedstead. Onto its gable, however, a wide, slope-roofed shed had been constructed by Kennart carpenters, made strong by iron clamps forged by Baynham, and even given a roof of chipped slate. Draped with fruits and strings of vegetables, dumpy with sacks and gleaming with jars, the shop within a two-month was an attraction in itself, a higgledy-piggle of common and exotic comestibles which brought women down from Drymen, Balnesmoor and Croft-amie and yielded the Cunninghams a turnover undreamed of in the streets of Glasgow.

The shop did not close at dusk. Lanterns soon adorned the posts and gave the place the appearance of a fairy cave. Menfolk came to buy beer and, with a back-of-the-hand mutter to George, to be slipped a dram in a glass or have their little dented flasks filled. Profit there was in foodstuffs, but real profit lay in the sale of drink. Profit was returned as stock, stock converted quickly into profit.

It was partly contrivance and partly accident which caused the Cunninghams' enterprise to bloom so verdantly and which brought debt, drunkenness and discontent to the industrious community of Kennart and, in due course, tore James Moodie's empire apart.

f Elspeth had been asked to give an account of her affair with Michael Blaven she would have found herself at a loss to des-cribe it in any detail at all. In retrospect it seemed far too tran-ient to have had such a devastating effect upon her and, by its brevity, to be hardly more than a passing flirtation. Of course it was more serious than that, much more serious, but the stretch of time from her first love-making until that shattering afternoon in January seemed, on the surface, calm and radiant and, in Elspeth's eyes, without sin, guilt or deception.

Nine times in all Elspeth drove a gig to Preaching Friar. Nine times she climbed the little straight staircase to the bright white bedroom and undressed there and slid into the narrow pine bedstead with Michael and joined with him in an act o love. But there was a strange paradox in the circumstances, a price to be paid for the ease with which their meetings were arranged and brought to pass; the more intimately she knew Michael, the less he revealed himself to her.

Her memories of that brief period were of sensual pleasure of the contact of his body, her startling responses, episodes o passion which swept away her need to know more of him They hardly talked at all as they lay entwined under the bedclothes listening to the sounds of Harlwood and the house stroke upon the whitewashed walls like gentle sea waves. I did not seem dangerous or immoral but, when she thought o it, it did not seem real either.

Reality was Janet Blaven's stern features when she bade Mistress Moodie goodbye. The woman disapproved so thoroughly of adultery that Elspeth was at a loss to understand why the spinster lady had any part in aiding her to cheat upon her husband.

Another puzzling feature of her relationship with Michael was that James did not, at any time, construe her visits t Miss Blaven's cottage in a sinister light. He was suspicious o everyone; yet his hatred of Matt Sinclair, his fixation on the wrong 'rival', flourished like a poisonous plant.

Miss Blaven had drawn up a set of rules which Michael had promised to obey. The woman was adamant about them. No writing of letters each to the other. No meetings upon the moor or anywhere else, apart from Preaching Friar. No impulsive 'visiting' on Elspeth's part, the rendezvous to be by prior arrangement only. Miss Blaven believed that one fine day James Moodie would crash through the little door of her cottage and the sinful couple would be shamed and hounded and exposed.

But October dripped into November and November into December and, with the weather holding mild if wet, the weekly 'visits' continued without check. It was not until close to Christmas that Miss Blaven sent Elspeth a note in which she stated that it would be best if Mistress Moodie would not call for several weeks. No explanation was offered, no reason. Elspeth fretted, was tempted to write a letter in return, to break the promise she had made to the spinster and roll up to Preaching Friar in the gig, unannounced. But she chose to obey Miss Blaven's instruction out of gratitude for the woman's charity to her and for the fact that she had aided the lovers at all.

Elspeth did not even know that Michael was ill.

Four weeks passed without a word from Preaching Friar, four weeks without Michael, four weeks in which she suffered James's peculiar moods which contrasted darkly with the cheerfulness of the festive season. Her loneliness, highlighted, was harder to bear than before. As New Year came and went and January slipped away, Elspeth's impatience turned to desperation and she wrote a letter to Miss Blaven asking if she might call upon her soon. No reply was forthcoming.

Eventually, on a crisp, frosty day three weeks into the month Elspeth could contain herself no longer. She instructed Kerr to tell Tolland to have a gig ready. Wrapped up warmly, she took the reins from the horse-boy and rode along the rock-hard, ringing road between the villages, arriving at Preaching Friar a moment or two before noon.

The sun shone on frost-furred fields and painted the south-facing hedgerows a vivid green, cheating in its suggestion that winter was over. Everything that forenoon was so clear and so bright that Elspeth's gloom lifted and she felt exuberant and sure that Michael, at least, would welcome her.

She tethered the pony in the narrow lane, went through the kitchen gate and walked around by the flagged path to the front. Roses which graced the trellis had withered completely and hung in puckered bundles from the wiry thorn. In the garden, dung had been strewed thickly upon the beds and the air was tainted by its barnyard smell. In an upstairs window there was a trace of a light or perhaps the reflection of sun in the oval mirror in the corner of the bedroom Eagerly she rapped with the iron knocker and waited, glowing with cold and expectation.

The servant girl who opened the door to her had the appearance of a corpse, with dark-circled eyes, drawn cheeks and a nose red and roughened by a heavy cold.

"Mistress Moodie, is it?"

"I've called to see Miss Blaven."

"She's gone out for a wee bit."

"Gone where?"

"Walkin'. She's hardly crossed the doorstep this past month, since Mister Michael was struck down."

"I believe," said Elspeth, "that I shall wait for her."

"Come in, then." At last the girl admitted her.

Elspeth said, "I did not know that Mister Michael had been ill. Is he . . . is he well again?"

"No, Mistress Moodie, that he's not."

The maid showed her into the parlour. It was as prim as ever, and less attractive, lacking the bowls of flowers and leaf-sprigs which, in other seasons, gave it vitality. No fire was lighted in the hearth, though the ash-pail stood there and a strew of twigs and kindling.

"Have I interrupted your work?" said Elspeth.

"I have other things I can be doin', Mistress Moodie."

"No. Get on with this room, if you've been so instructed."

"It's warmer in the kitchen," said the servant.

She looked fearfully unwell. Elspeth, in spite of her anxiety about Michael, spared a word of sympathy. "Should you not be in your bed?"

"I have been. I canna stay away any longer."

"Hasn't Miss Blaven given you a medicine?"

"Aye, an' it fair helpit. Smothered my cough and eased my chest."

The day-maid had been kept discreetly occupied during Elspeth's previous visits. If the servant had guessed what had been going on, she gave no sign of it. To her, Elspeth Moodie was just another oddity, like Miss Blaven herself. She pretended respect because her wage depended on it.

Elspeth said, "How long has Miss Blaven been out?"

"About an hour, Mistress Moodie. She'll no' be o'er long in arrivin' back, though, since she has the young man t' feed."

"Perhaps," said Elspeth, "Mister Michael would welcome a little company."

The servant shook her head. "I canna say if he's well enough. I'm not to be goin' in there, disturbin' him."

Elspeth said, "I'll go up. If he's asleep, I'll not waken him."

Still the servant seemed unsure. But Elspeth's anxiety had ncreased and made her reckless. There was in her an appalling fear, a fear that the small signs and unusual occurrences had more significance than Michael had led her to believe. Memory of them came crowding upon her and leaving the girl where she stood, sniffing by the cold hearth, she went up the short staircase to the upper floor of the cottage where Michael's bedroom was situated.

She paused before the door, breathless now with an overwhelming fear of what she might find within. She knocked, did not await his response, turned the knob and entered.

It was neither candle nor lamp which she had seen from the path below. Herbs smoked in a tiny wire basket hung over a glow of charcoal on a round brass tray. In the sunlight which streamed through the leaded panes the wisps of smoke from he pannier were like ill-formed ghosts. In the grate the fire was banked high and the room was warm, warm and fragrant as a summer's afternoon. It was as if Miss Blaven had known of her coming and had prepared a pleasant indoor bower or love-making. Only the appurtenances of the sick-room ndicated that this was far from the truth.

Elspeth noticed a muslin-shrouded pot, compresses hung to dry upon a rack by the fire, medicine bottles, spoons and nvalid cups on the table close to the head of the bed, and that a broad, ugly, earthenware bowl which was propped against he bolster was stained with sickness and blood. A curtain of yellow lace had been fastened above Michael's face to keep he winter sunlight from striking him, as if he were too weak o bear its weight. For a moment Elspeth assumed that Michael was asleep. She approached quietly, leaving the bedroom door ajar, a ridiculous gesture of modesty.

Physical desire had gone out of Elspeth. She felt as she had done four years ago when her mother lay close to death, changed in the nature of her love. She loved Michael at the ast as she might have come to love him in old age, with a closeness which the stolen hours locked in his arms could not provide, for she understood now that Michael was dying and hat nothing, not even love, could save him and draw him back to her.

Elspeth threw off her cape and bonnet, stripped off her gloves and flung herself down by him, her body gently laid across his chest. Nothing in her life upon the Nettleburn, none of the pretend pain of young love and its disappointments, not even the callous strain that infected her as part of youth, had prepared her for the anguish of that quarter-hour alone with Michael, alone with the unassailable knowledge that she had never needed to fear the future for the future had been no longer than a few cherished hours snatched from the autumn days.

There seemed to be so little of him. It was as if he had reverted into childhood. His skin was smooth, fair and unblemished so only the ivory-yellow tint hinted at that fatal disease which confused a promise of growth with the certainty of decay.

"Michael, my dear Michael," she whispered.

She could hear suspirations in his chest and throat, imagined that she could feel his thready, stabbing pulse. He stirred, but only a little, lids flickering to show her dull, unappreciative pupils leeched of colour. His hand was all bone. He did not respond when she clasped it, gave no sign that he knew who she was. It appalled Elspeth to realise that five weeks ago she had lain with him in nakedness and had detected no trace of malignant illness. In helplessness there was anger, anger at Janet Blaven for using her, for not informing her that Michael had been marked by God to leave them both. If she had known how it was she would have loved him more, loved him back into life.

Elspeth the pragmatist, the girl who had dug the rigs of the Nettleburn, was lost now. She placed her brow upon Michael's chest and prayed for a miracle of healing; a year, a six-month, a season of health for Michael, whom she had loved but had hardly known. She was still upon her knees when Janet Blaven quietly entered the room.

The first Elspeth knew of the woman's presence was a hand upon her shoulder. "He cannot hear you, child."

Elspeth started and glanced round guiltily. She was shamed at being caught there in prayer. Perhaps, and the thought did not stick, it was her wickedness which was being punished.

"Come up," said Janet Blaven. "We'd best leave him to rest."

"Is he. . ? Say that he isn't . . . Tell me, please."

Janet Blaven shook her head. She still wore an outdoor garment, loose and ill-fitting like a horse-coat, still had a round straw bonnet tied with a scarf of purple wool upon her head. She too had aged. Sobbing, the girl clung to the woman.

On the bed, for a moment, Michael stirred once more, giving a moist, voluble cough, followed by a small convulsion. He did not open his eyes, however, and appeared oblivious to the women at his bedside.

"He's in no pain," said Miss Blaven. "I can promise you that I'll not see him suffer."

"What have you. . .?"

"Simple herbs. Strong remedies. Opiates. There is," the woman drew a shuddering breath, "no more that I can do for him now."

"What right have *you* to keep him here? Why do you not summon a proper physician?"

"No physician can save him; nor surgeon either."

"You don't *wish* him to be cured. You want him for yourself." Hysterically Elspeth thrust the woman from her and, swaying this way and that, cried, "*Michael! Oh, Michael!*"

Miss Blaven gripped the girl by the arms and led her from the white bedroom into the beamed corridor at the top of the staircase. She kicked the door shut with her foot. "Stop it. Stop it this instant."

"Let me stay with him," Elspeth pleaded. "I'll make no sound. *Please* let me be with him."

"No, Elspeth." Miss Blaven was firm. "Soon, very soon, I must send for his father and brothers. I had not wished you to see him again. I would have preferred you to remember Michael as he was."

"To hear that he was dead, without preliminary, without warning?" said Elspeth. "How can you be so heartless?"

"Lower your voice. My servant's trustworthy but she's not made of stone. The less she knows the better for all concerned. Come in here. We must talk privately."

Miss Blaven ushered the distraught girl into a second bedroom. Hardly more than a closet under the eaves, it was almost bare of furnishing except for three or four chests and a truckle bed. Miss Blaven closed the door carefully, leaned her back upon it as if to prevent Elspeth's escape. There was no evidence of sympathy in the woman now. She was implacably logical.

She said, "I did not anticipate that Michael would fall into the final phase of his illness quite so soon. But there's no predicting this fearful disease. It takes its own unfathomable courses."

Elspeth did not think to ask the name of the disease. She was shaking as shock caught up with her.

Miss Blaven said, "You must be exceptionally strong, Elspeth. You must compose yourself, return home to your husband. He must have no inkling of what has happened."

"How can I. . .?"

"I we – have done all that we can. But it is not quite over for either of us. You, however, must put Michael from mind henceforth. It was, and you must so regard it, an interlude of love and no more. Your husband suspects nothing, does he?"

Sobbing, shaking, Elspeth answered, "Nothin' at all."

"Then we have all been very fortunate," said Janet Blaven.

"How *dare* you say such a thing with Michael dyin'. Is that your good fortune, Miss Blaven?"

Once more the woman caught Elspeth. Her hands were as strong as a man's. She held the frantic girl by the shoulders, forcing her to listen.

"Hear me out. Listen and understand. Stop behaving like a spoilt child. You're a woman and must behave responsibly with fortitude and courage. *For Michael's sake.*"

"Michael's sake?"

"His reputation can still be damaged."

"Ah!"

"By what stroke of luck the predatory tattle of servants and village folk has failed to alert your husband, I cannot say. Apparently he suspects nothing and regards your visits to Harlwood as having been harmless."

"I don't care about James. I don't care about myself."

"*Think of Michael,*" said Miss Blaven loudly.

"You're worried about your own good name."

"Naturally," Miss Blaven admitted. "I'll live here with the memory of Michael. I'll never have him far from my thoughts, believe me. But I am not anxious to have memories tarnished by recriminations and slanders. If Michael had not been as he was, I would have sent him packing from the Lennox before I would have become his collaborator and your accomplice. But there was no time, do you see? No time for wounds to heal. He needed to taste love."

"I believe, Miss Blaven, that you have used me," said Elspeth stiffly, anger replacing grief for a moment. "You'd no thought or regard for me at all. Even now you canna spare my feelin's."

"No, I'm not so – Michael did not belong to either of us, Elspeth, least of all to you."

"I loved him. I love him still."

Miss Blaven said, "Yes, and he loved you."

The weeping fit was sudden and soft.

Elspeth bent her head and covered her face with her hands. At last she was reconciled to the inevitable loss. She had never really doubted it, not from the moment she had seen Michael. It was, and had been, a malicious device of Janet Blaven but it too had been advanced out of love. Elspeth understood that now, found that understanding tilted her grief, made it – almost – bearable.

The truth was that she had fallen in love with Michael's loving, and had been drastically opened to emotions that she had shut within her strange marriage. Fleetingly she convinced herself that Michael was not dying at all but simply leaving, passing not unto his Maker in Heaven but out of her life. It was a concept she could grasp, a comforting notion which erased betrayal and bitterness. Michael had loved her. She would love him always, no matter what befell her as James's wife. Suddenly, with perfect clarity, Elspeth understood what Janet Blaven meant. She must cherish Michael's memory to preserve the love that had existed between them. It was her duty. She must, indeed, be strong enough to let him go.

She wiped her eyes with a handkerchief.

"I'll do as you ask," Elspeth said.

"It will be difficult to do nothing, say nothing."

"Let me say goodbye to him."

"Yes."

In the bedroom the sun had slipped down the diamond pane and spilled light like watered wine upon the curtain. Michael had not stirred. The drug had pulled him down into painless depths where vitality mattered less than ease. It was not sleep but opium that held him from her but she spoke to him nonetheless, stooped over, her lips brushing his brow. It was how beloved children died, not young men, not the person who, only a handful of months ago, had strode upon the open moor, had found joy in wild country and had loved her under the rush of the high yew hedges in the October night.

It seemed that she, like Michael, had run her span in one rapid and ecstatic episode. She was glad now that the woman had kept the truth from her.

She shed no tears when she left him. Touching her lips to his she found them to be without taste and without warmth, a sign that she could not, no matter how she willed it, draw him back again.

The woman waited by the top of the staircase and preceded the girl down into the hall. The servant skulked, sniffling, in the kitchen as Miss Blaven followed her 'guest' out into the garden.

"How long will Michael . . . be with you?" Elspeth asked.

"Three days, four at most."

"Where will he be put to rest?"

"By the side of his mother and sisters in Glasgow St Cyrus."

"I assume it would be advisable for me not to visit the grave?" said Elspeth.

Miss Blaven inclined her head.

"In that case," Elspeth offered her gloved hand, "I will bid you goodbye."

"Will you not call on me, Elspeth, when the spring comes?"

"I think not," said Elspeth.

"Perhaps, for the sake of it, I may call upon you at Moss House?"

"For the sake of what?"

"Appearances."

Elspeth gave no answer.

She walked down the path by the reeking flowerbeds to the place in the lane where the pony was tethered. She unhitched the reins and climbed into the little conveyance and snapped the pony into motion. She looked back only once, from the crest where the lane opened on to the road.

Behind her, Preaching Friar lay bathed in the winter sunlight, calm, immaculate, pink-tinted. But the light in the window was too bright, her tears too profuse, for Elspeth to take it in, so she rode on quickly, rode back to the sober comfort of Moss House and, since she had no one else, to James.

SIX

The Fool of Quality

The most vociferous opponents of small-still whisky were teetotallers, clergymen and pig-rich Tories who sucked up to the Crown. Smugglers – a generic name for all who diddled the Treasury of its rightful dues – came in for some heavy whacks in the columns of national journals and in the sermons of the 'unco guid', those to whom the word 'economy' meant maintaining a status quo of hardship and repression in the labouring classes.

Padric Tomelty did not see it in that light. He thought of himself as a friend of the people, who dispensed at great personal risk the fine brown malts. Pad was not afeared of prison, fee-fines or of being shot at by King's musketeers. He dwelled in a haze of alcohol, worshipped by his womenfolk, employees and his customers alike. Public howls about the effects of whisky-drinking – social degradation, sloth, destitution and moral degeneration – fell off Pad's back like water from a duck. Crop-raisers made money by selling grain to Pad. Innkeepers made money by buying a keg of untaxed whisky to mix with their own puny waters. Old crones, fit for nothing but crow-scaring, earned keep by carrying cannikins of Pad's whisky under their skirts to sell at fairs and cow-markets. Padric kept money spinning for many folk and if, in the process, he made himself quietly rich, who was to know of it or care.

Eardmore was the hub of Pad's activities. His stills were portable, of course, would not be found within four walls but buried in caves and mole-hill bothies on the moor. But he stored grain and made malt in Eardmore and, carefully buried behind a hog-sty, kept a reserve of ten anchors of matured stuff against a drought. It was at Eardmore too, once in a while, that Pad Tomelty threw a jollification for his agents, clients and friends, for Eardmore was a safe howff far out on the moor, which belonged to a wild old Whig named Kaye who never bothered to visit his property except to gather the rents and take a tithe of thirty gallons of best malt each Lady Day.

Pad did not reside in Eardmore. He had the rent of a foul wee cottage at the back of Balnesmoor where Babsie, Pad's whiskery wife, kept her brood in check and Brigit, when she was not tumbling in a hay-loft with some lad or other, spent her nights. Tonight, however, Pad would be making a pay-out and hosts of Tomeltys would congregate at Eardmore, slinking in cliques along the secret tracks that led to the hollow of black ground where, like a fungus, the hamlet had grown.

Brigit first took Matt Sinclair to Eardmore. It was a sharp night towards the middle of January when, accompanied by Kenneth McDonald and three Tomelty cousins, they sneaked past Moodie's sheep-pens at Dyers' Dyke on to the long rock ridge that lay below the sponge of the high moorland waste.

Matt was not seriously 'in love' with Brigit Tomelty. She was hardly the sort of lass to foster airy-fairy notions in a man. But he found her amusing and lively, in and out of bed, and had no need to 'pretend' when he was in her company. He was aware that she had a vindictive streak and that it excited her to be stealing the attentions of her best friend's husband. But he learned more from Brigit about the state of affairs at Ottershaw than ever he learned from Anna and knew more now about the habits and character of the new laird than his father ever would.

Giggling, gossip and horseplay whiled away the trudge over the open moor in no time and it surprised Matt when the lights of Eardmore appeared below. Though it was January, cattle still roamed the lean pastures and sheep cowered under isolated rowans. For all its bleakness there was a touch of magic in the scene and the freezing night air was wrinkled with the strains of music and merriment as if the hillside had split open to reveal the hall of an elfin palace. Eagerly Matt wrapped his arm about Brigit's waist and louped down the hill after Kenneth McDonald into the long, low byres which already throbbed with folk.

McDonald had informed him that Pad had something particular to celebrate. The Revenue Commissioners had jumped the duty yet again, demanding an annual tariff of seven pounds sixteen shillings for each gallon of a still's contents, with a levy of six shillings and sevenpence more on every gallon produced.

Licensed distillers would be hard pressed to pay the swamping tax. Quality would deteriorate and Tomelty's Best would fetch an extra threepence or so per pint from discerning palates. Perhaps that was the reason that Pad seemed in such high fettle, lording it like a king over his court of reprobates.

Stationed in front of a huge open fire to the right of the doorway Pad was perched on a barrel with a jug in one hand and a rib of beef in the other, his eyes gleaming with delight as he conducted the jig played by fife and fiddlers. Weltered about the fire were more girls than staffed Ottershaw and hardly a face among them that Matt recognised. Brigit's arm tightened about his waist and she administered an impudent jab to his backside.

"They're no' for the likes o' you, Matt," she warned.

"An' why are they not now, if they've a fancy for me?"

"I brought you, did I not?" Brigit answered. "So you're mine for the night."

"Aye, an' you're braw, Brigit, braw as any ten gypsy lassies, though a bit too snugly clad for the company, eh?"

"Is it this ye want t' see, Matt?" She loosened the ribbons of her bodice and, as her shawl fell back, exposed the fullness of her breasts. "For wee mannies to be restin' their heads on when they tire o' boozin'."

"I'll not tire, Brigit, not o' booze – or anythin' else. I'll see you off your feet e'er mornin'."

"I pray that ye will, Matt Sinclair. Indeed I'm hopin' ye'll not leave me standin' upright for more than a half-hour."

"Brigit, m' love, m' cushat." Pad had sighted the new arrivals. "An' have ye brought young Matt wi' ye, indeed? An' who's that skulkin' shy there? Why, if it's not the grand man himself! Welcome t' ye, McDonald, my soul. And welcome t' you also, Fitter."

"An' here's Willie an' his lass," said Brigit, dragging forward a male cousin and a small, dark-haired girl who seemed to Matt to be not much more than a child. "Willie from the Blane."

For an instant Matt was distracted by the presence at his elbow of a stranger, the man Pad had called Fitter. He was not so young as most of the people who had made the trail across the hill though not quite so old as Pad Tomelty himself. In fact, when Matt glanced at him, he found it impossible to gauge the fellow's age. He had a queer look to him. A thin pointed beard and curled moustache made his appearance stranger still, like a Spaniard or noble Frenchman, though his clothing was plain enough and the sly wee smile he gave in response to Pad's effusive welcome was like a fissure in granite.

Matt experienced a shiver out of nowhere as the man's eyes met his and the smile became broader and colder still.

"Crack her long bones, son," Fitter murmured.

"Eh? What's that you say?"

"Dance the bold one t' death."

"Aye, aye, so I will."

Matt moved closer to Brigit who was smacking kisses all over her father's puckered features and embracing him as if she had not seen him in a twelve-month.

How often, Matt wondered, did Pad engage in such revelry? They were safe enough here, he supposed, but if King's Officers did manage to sneak up on them, they would fill the jail at Stirling to the very gates and stifle the smugglers' trade for months. Pad was at ease, though, so Matt accepted that there was no risk of a raid and, at Pad's beckoning, found a jug before the cask, filling up the vessel to the brim.

From this position Matt could see that the whores on the straw were already soused. Cheeks aflame, their skirts were flung up to show their legs. Brigit was by him, though, nudging him impatiently with her shins. He handed the jug up to her and filled another for himself.

"Here," Pad cried. "A toast t' my bonnie lassie, Bridie, an' to this busy lad."

Nobody paid much attention but Matt clicked his jug with Pad's and then, as if dismissed from audience, found himself being tugged away to make room for Fitter. When, several minutes later, he glanced round again he saw that Pad had climbed down from the barrel and was engaged in what appeared to be grave discussion with the bearded stranger.

"Who is he, Brigit?" Matt asked. "The Fitter mannie."

"A carrier," Brigit shrugged.

"I've never seen him before."

"He carries round the Campsies. I know him hardly at all." She drank from the jug. "Never heed him, Matt. Come wi' me. We'll find a neuk where we can tipple in peace."

Stalls were screened with rotting sackcloth. Behind the swags, lovers engaged in noisy couplings. Matt glimpsed the kick of naked feet, heard the unmistakable gasps of a woman at the climax of pleasure, the deep baying laughter of a man. It was not private here. Matt had no stomach for public love-making in a stinking cow-stall. He was surprised how the prospect shocked him.

"Brigit, it's o'er busy here for my likin' "

Brigit seemed astonished at his reticence.

"I'll find a place." She nuzzled up to him and kissed him with dragging touches of her lips. "I'm needin' you now, Matt. Sore needin'."

Out of the firelight, her breath sharp with whisky, Brigit seemed less attractive than he had formerly thought. No, Bridie Tomelty was not attractive at all. She was no better than the whores, waiting for whoever would take them. Matt closed his eyes and opened them again, hoping that he might see Brigit differently. But it was not in Pad Tomelty's daughter that the fault lay, it was in the son of the grieve of Ottershaw.

Sensing his withdrawal, Brigit quickly hauled aside the canvas which hung over the last stall in the row. She had no modesty, no care about who might be within. At first Matt could not see clearly then as he stepped closer, made curious by Brigit's sudden start, he recognised the Sylas sisters there within.

The dummy was propped like a great scarecrow in a corner, a candle of red wax in a water-dish in her lap. Her mouth was scooped into a long bill, her lips pursed, panting and cooing, while her sister lay covered by a man as old as Matt's father, head sprigged with grey hair, his breeks about his knees. Past the old man's shoulder, Matt had a sight of the girl's face, flat and expressionless, her hands folded upon her breast. Her response to the male's passion was less than a hundredth part of that which her mute sister displayed, as if one took the pleasure from the other in some devilish act of transference.

Brigit dropped the canvas curtain instantly and clutched at Matt's shoulder to pull him away. Nervously Matt forced a half-laugh but the fear in Brigit's eyes smothered it and he yielded, turning too.

There, only feet behind them in the nether region of the byre, stood Fitter outlined against the fireglow, smiling.

"What d' you want wi' me?" Matt snapped.

"Crack her bones, son," Fitter said.

"Come awa', Matt. Come awa'. We'll find another stall, later on."

Brigit was jerky with tension all of a sudden, though it could not have been her sense of propriety which had been offended. It was something about the sight of the dummy in the deep stall. Something that Matt did not understand. He did not understand either why the bearded man should cause such a stab of fear in him or why, just at that moment, he was suddenly as cold as ice and longed to find a great banked roaring fire at which to warm his limbs.

Giving in to Brigit, Matt hurried after her down the length of the long building, back out of the musty gloom and into the proximity of the open fire, feeling heat bathe and soothe him almost at once. He put his arm around Brigit Tomelty's waist and hugged her to him, but she cuddled against him without desire, as a child would.

When he dared to look back Matt found that Fitter had vanished. The man from Kilsyth did not reappear, not even for the paying-out which took place about ten of the clock before everyone became too drunk to count the bounty that little Pad Tomelty dispensed.

Anna did not think of herself as a thief. She behaved, however, as cunningly as one, receiving considerable thrills from her successful raids upon the larder and a sense of triumphant relief when she cleared the house and escaped into the trees with her booty.

She began by removing a couple of slices of flank mutton from a leftover plate. She had no need to hide them since she ate them at once in the security of the back staircase. Next came a particularly succulent piece of hare, three 'backs' of which had been larded with bacon and braised in cream and white wine. Randall had returned one with expressions of regret that he could not quite polish off all of Mrs Lacy's wonderful offering. Again Anna scoffed the meat in the seclusion of the stairs before carrying the tray down into the kitchen. It gave her an odd intimacy with Randall to consume his leftovers, to partake of the same rich food as he did, from the same plate too.

The first thing which Anna sneaked out of Ottershaw was a fist-sized end of red venison pudding which came down from Randall's midday dinner one afternoon in December. Anna's scheme was daringly simple. She removed the pudding piece from the dish, licked it clean and popped it into a pocket which she had sewn into the back of her skirt. All afternoon she had gone about her routine tasks with the pudding pressing against her, her nerves tingling. What triumph and relief when Mr Hunter duly dismissed her and she slung on her bonnet and shawl and went out, not too hurriedly, into open air and skipped away from the mansion. How exquisite the deer-meat pudding tasted when she finally ate it, with some ceremony, at her own fireside. She did not share it with Matt or leave any trace of it for her husband to discover.

One thing led to another. Soon Anna was hiding cogs of cherry trifle and apple-crumble on a shelf high above the landing door, a place neglected by the maids and as safe as anywhere. Late in the day she would retrieve the cog, hide it in a pouch in her skirt and slip away home with it. The game was thorough, complicated and stimulating. It occupied her attention throughout most of the day and diminished the terrible tedium by testing her nerve and ingenuity. Naturally Anna would no more have thought of lifting a candle-stump or a wash-clout than she would have of breaking into the silver and would have shunned any servant who stole trinkets to sell beneath the barrel at a local fair. The difference between one sort of 'crime' and another was crystal clear to Anna. She even managed to delude herself that she needed the leftovers to keep herself nourished, which was, of course, nonsense.

Secretiveness was a most alluring element. When she sat at table in the cramped, dirty kitchen of Pine Cottage she would imagine that she was Randall's guest in Ottershaw, would converse with him as she snipped her beef or toyed with a slice of pie. Wittily she would parry his compliments, give sparkling rejoinders - all the while trying to ignore Jacko's chatterings and smoke from potatoes on the hob.

If Matt got home before her she would hide the day's haul in a box in the closet in the bedroom and consume it only when she had the cottage to herself again.

On one particular Saturday in late January Anna was unexpectedly robbed of the pleasure of pretence. She got home about half past six o'clock. It came as no surprise to find that Matt had not yet returned. She extracted the bowl from its pouch and carefully put it on the table. Cinnamon custard, thick, yellow and speckled with raisins, gave her an appetite. She did not immediately take off her shawl and bonnet but raked and built up the fire, filled the kettle from the pail and hung it over the crackling sticks. She laid out a clean dish and a spoon, took off her workaday garments and, drawing a stool up close to the hearth, hunched over it in a moment of luxurious anticipation. The custard waited. She could smell its aromatic goodness. The first wisp of steam curled from the kettle spout. Anna sighed contentedly. She did not know where Matt was or when he would return, nor did she care. It was pleasant in the kitchen, warm and quiet.

Indeed it was quiet. Even Jacko was silent.

Tensing slightly Anna glanced up at the wickerwork cage on the rafters. She could see the animal within. It lay on the floor of the cage but not at all comfortably.

"Jacko," she called out sharply. "Jacko."

The monkey did not stir.

Anna got to her feet and stood below the cage. She could smell the damp acrid stench of the straw in the cage bottom.

"Jacko? Do you want a nut, Jacko? See here."

There was no trace of movement, not even the rise and fall of his sides, fur prickling with each breath. Puzzled and apprehensive, Anna climbed on the stool, took the cage in her arms and gave it a shake.

"Oh, God! God save me!" Anna exclaimed.

She unknotted the ropes, brought the cage to the floor, snapped open the door and stuck her hand inside. Grabbing the long, elegant, impudent tail, she gave it a tug. The tail uncoiled hardly at all, just enough to expose Jacko's face. The upper lip was lifted, showing yellow teeth, the eyes were fixed half-open, sightless.

Poor Jacko was dead.

She dragged out the corpse, shook it like a dolly, forced herself to extend the limbs, turn the monkey over and very carefully examine it, even to peer into its mouth, wondering if it had choked or strangled. Nothing indicated how the creature had died. Even so, Anna was terrified. At any moment Matt might stamp across the threshold, crying for his pet. All he would have would be a stiffening corpse. Anna knew her husband only too well. His grief would be violent. He would blame her for the monkey's passing. Matt, finding no cause, would surely accuse her of murdering the brute.

Tears flooding her eyes, Anna lifted the capuchin and rocked it in her arms, sobbing. "Why did ye have t' die? Why, ye stupid creature?"

Outside, she heard a mongrel growl. She released the monkey immediately, dropping it without ceremony on the floor, flung open the cottage door and peered into the darkness.

"Is that you, Matt?" she shouted. "Matt, answer me."

But it was not her husband. When she stepped indoors again the sight of the animal's corpse sprawled upon the flagstones brought her up sharply and, in that instant, Anna was seized with an idea which – at the time – seemed rational and brilliant.

Quickly she replaced the cage upon the beams, tied it fast, opened the door of the cage and left it so. Next she took away the bowl of custard and hid it in the closet then returned to the kitchen, picked up the monkey and carried it in her arms out of the cottage and around to the back. She found an old peat-cutting spade propped against the hut gable and, putting the monkey down by the spade, went indoors again to light a lantern. Mercifully there was still no sign of Matt's return. Anna went on with her scheme more confidently. If he came back and found her gone, it would help to confirm her tale, her lie. She intended to tell Matt that Jacko had run off. It would not be the first time that the capuchin had scampered out of the cottage, disported himself in the trees for three or four hours while Matt had tried to coax him back to the leash. In the past Jacko had always returned when he was hungry, lured down by a bowl of scraps. This time, though, Jacko would not return. Jacko would be 'lost' for ever.

It did not strike Anna as ironic that she chose the track to the Nettleburn. The Nettleburn was a long way from Ottershaw and still scarred by the slurry of rock and mud that the great autumn flood of 1809 had dragged down the hillside. Ruins of Mammy's little house protruded from the hummocks over which bracken and coarse grasses had rooted and spread.

The ground was hard and it cost Anna an hour of vigorous effort to howk out a hole. She worked without the lantern, having just enough light from the frosty sky, and dug the hole deep. She folded the capuchin's rigid limbs up to make him neat. He still wore the little vest and breeks that she had sewn for him. She shed a few soft tears as she slipped him into the hole. She packed the earth, replaced the turves, finally manhandled three big stones on to the raw digging, lit the lantern and checked the grave.

There would be frost after midnight, a coating of bristling white hoar would cover the site completely. By chance a dog might sniff out the spot but she doubted it and, soon after the thaw took hold, poor Jacko's bones would rot into the soil.

Lantern in hand, spade across her shoulder, Anna took the field corner route to the Ottershaw track and returned to Pine Cottage. To her relief Matt had not come back in her absence. Now she felt sure that he would be exceedingly late and welcomed the opportunity to compose herself for inevitable conflict. She would simply confront him with 'the truth', tell him how Jacko had skipped away through the half-open door and scrambled into the pine trees, how she had searched in vain for an hour or more. To substantiate her tale she placed a platter of fat bacon on the stoop and roped the front door so that it lay ajar.

In fact, she was being kind to Matt by giving him hope. In due course he would reconcile himself to the loss of the one thing in the world he truly loved, his damned monkey.

About midnight, Anna went into the bedroom. Seated on the mattress, she scoffed the cinnamon custard and hid the cog away. She snuggled down under the covers and, wearied by her exertions, soon fell into a deep sleep.

When she awakened it was broad white daylight and Matt, thank God, had not yet returned home.

Dunn moved smartly from the doorway and pulled out a chair for the gentleman who had already been relieved of hat and cloak at the hall door. The boy rushed around the table as soon as the guest was seated, and held the chair for his master, very patient and careful. Randall adjusted his leg, then, with a smile, said, "I trust you did not find the road too icy for your carriage, Mister Moodie?"

"Not at all. It's most dry and pleasant for this New Year month. Quite unseasonably so, in fact."

"Good weather for the ewes," Randall said.

"They grow, if anythin', a little too fat."

"February, even March, might rub that excess away, I'll be bound," said Randall. To the boy he said, "See what Mister Moodie will have to fill his glass, Dunn."

"Aye, sir."

"A little wine, if you like," said James.

"Your wife, she did not feel able to the journey?"

"She sends her apologies," said James. "She's a trifle under the weather."

"It is not a serious malady, I hope."

"A minor indisposition."

The men did not speak as Dunn manhandled the big decanter from the side table and poured wine into the glasses. He did it dextrously and, without spilling a drop, returned the decanter to its tray.

James expected the laird to make some passing mention of his sister-in-law who was now a servant under this roof but, to his relief, Randall said not a word about the embarrassing situation. As it was Sunday, Anna Sinclair would not be on duty at Ottershaw.

"Did you attend the kirk this morning, Mister Moodie?"

"I did, laird, but in Harlwood, not Balnesmoor."

"Harlwood?"

"Candidly, I cannot abide our new minister."

"Yes, I believe that the Reverend Eshner is noted for palpable piety pompously promoted."

"Appropriate alliteration, sir," said James.

Randall grinned and James relaxed a little. It was possible, after all, that the laird was simply showing friendship to a neighbour, though James continued to have his doubts. He had kept abreast of events at Ottershaw and had learned that Gilbert was to be sent packing and that Randall was in process of making changes. Changes cost money. Capital would be required, and he, James Simpson Moodie, leased three hundred acres of grazing along the skirt of the moor and had made improvements, at his own expense, to the hillside pasture.

Randall came to the point. "I hear, Mister Moodie, that you have taken your Cheviot flock off the slopes of [illegible] and replaced them with Blackface. May I ask why?"

"The flock did not thrive well enough on that [illegible] ground. I have taken the Cheviots to another pasture, near [illegible]."

"For more protection?"

"Aye, an' better grass."

"Is there not money in finer wool?"

"Indeed there is," said James. "[illegible] for Cheviot pack tumbled last year to nine pence, it promises to rise again in the coming season. Trade with America an' custom of His Majesty's government keeps it up for the time being. Of course, competition from foreign imported wool is much reduced because of the war."

"What of the day when the war is brought to a conclusion?"

"My prediction is that preference will change in favour of a quality combing-wool."

"Hence, sir, you do not ignore the little ugly Blackface breed?"

"I ignore nothing that trots on four pins an' bears a fleece," said James.

"Is it combing-wool which supplies your looms at Kennart, if I may ask?" said the laird.

"Not entirely. I supply a mixed market."

"I trust you are not offended by my direct questions?"

"You have given me no offence, as yet, laird."

"You see, Mister Moodie, I have a proposition for you."

"Propose away."

"I wish to sell the Ottershaw Cheviots."

"Includin' the rams?"

"Down to the last tup."

"Send them to Stirling come the back end," James advised.

"Do you have no interest in a private transaction?"

James said, "In a fallin' market, laird?"

"Come now, Mister Moodie, the market is not going to plummet overnight. Apart from the fleeces there's money to be made from the mutton."

"Aye, your lamented father would turn in his grave to hear you speak so," said James. "But I grant you the flock might be sustained in the traditional manner by shearin' an' slaughter at the fourth year."

"I assume you know the flock well?"

"Four hundred horns," said James. "I do not know how many ewes are in lamb or how they are presently conditioned."

"Oh, they have not been neglected. Sinclair would not allow me to let them run to rot, even if I was inclined to be wasteful of a precious asset. You have my word that the Cheviots are in prime condition."

"Do you not wish to take the crop of lambs, laird? Sell come September, split the breedin' and rearin'? It's what I would do."

"Now, Mister Moodie – as it stands."

James heard himself laugh, ruefully. "To drove four hundred fat Cheviots any distance in winter weather is a fearful bit of a risk. What if there was blizzard on the road, to give an example, or tardy spring growth? Any man who took purchase now would be gamblin' on so many unpredictable factors."

"You've wintered Cheviots on Drumglass, have you not?"

"I have indeed."

"Successfully, too," said Randall. "The Cheviot is not a particularly soft breed. The breeding-rams are pure and the blood has been kept uncontaminated by Leicester crossing. Taken as a foundation flock, the Ottershaw Cheviots are valuable, Mister Moodie. Almost, I am tempted to say, an investment."

"Put them in the auction pen, in that case."

"How much would you pay?" Randall came out with it.

"Three thousand pounds."

"Preposterously low."

"I'd have grass to find, the drove to cost, an' the chance of a poor lambin' from unsettled ewes," said James.

"You lease the long stretch from the Dyke to Drumglass at a thirty-year fixed price," said Randall. "My father was, alas, not far-sighted in that respect."

"Might I point out, laird, that I've scattered money on to the ground, have paid out of my own pocket for drainage an' re-seedin' an' have started to cut back the bracken line?"

Randall shifted in his chair, leaned his elbow on the table and drew himself to the weaver. He might have spent the best part of his life in other pursuits but the Bontine strain was not so easily subsumed, and he had his father's love of and sharpness in dealing.

"I can break the lease, Mister Moodie."

"I doubt it, laird."

"Ah, but I can."

Randall spoke with such assurance that James was stunned into silence. His original striking of the clauses of the lease had been done in the traditional manner, though, of course, he had had his legal agents peruse the document before signature. Old Sir Gilbert had done nothing by way of individual amendments or addenda and, though the document was long and wordy, James found it difficult to believe that some loophole had been left for the new laird to wriggle through. The truth was, however, that the weaver had never expected to be dealing with Randall but with Young Gibbie. If he had foreseen that the soldier son might one day be in command of Ottershaw then he would have studied the terms of the lease in even greater detail.

"No, Mister Moodie, you haven't neglected anything," Randall said, correctly interpreting his visitor's perplexity. "But I have only a twelve-month to execute the terms of my father's will, and my father was exceedingly generous in his legacies. I have been obliged to make substantial payment to my stepmother and to my full brother, to Gilbert, and to collect for the payment of certain other legacies to the rest of my father's children."

"But you're the sole inheritor of Ottershaw house and lands, are you not?"

"That is so."

"Then you must also inherit the obligations of the leases."

"True, but clauses fixing the terms of endurance of leases are governed by a necessary privilege to renounce, in certain very particular circumstances."

James said, "I've never heard of such circumstances."

"My lawyer, Mister Angus Hildebrand of Dumbarton, has done more than hear of the circumstances. He has isolated them and applied them to my present situation."

"I took on the tract of land from the quarry to the slope of Drumglass, which included the Nettleburn patch then leased by Cochran, on the understanding that I would have it for thirty years. I've sunk much into improvement."

"For which you will be entitled to partial compensation."

"Partial?"

"At the will of an arbiter or, if that does not suit, on the word of a Judge Ordinary."

"Proceedings, do you mean?"

"Come, Mister Moodie, let's not take ourselves to war just yet," said Randall, resting his other elbow on the table and bridging his hands. "Be assured, however, that I'm not lying about the legality of it. Briefly, as Hildebrand has discovered, Ottershaw's inheritor may declare 'necessity' in respect of any portion if it is incumbent upon him to sell a portion to raise the sums for legacies. It's a protective measure, a very sensible one, to prevent an heir being forced into bankruptcy by malicious relatives."

"Would you sell a portion of Ottershaw?"

"Only as a last resort. If I am unable to sell the Cheviot flock, I'll sell the three hundred acres half-hill strip from the quarry ridge to Drumglass – the stretch you presently lease."

"I'd buy it," said James.

"No, Mister Moodie, no, you would not buy it."

"Could you, laird, prevent me if it came upon the open market?" said James, then shook his head. "Naturally it would not come upon the open market. How would the sale be made?"

"On paper only, by private agreement with my brother Gilbert."

"I see," said James. "Written off against the debt to Gilbert, defrayed perhaps until such time as you could buy it back from him?"

"Hildebrand's quite sure of the legality of the proceeding."

It was James Moodie's turn to grin ruefully.

In spite of the pressure of worry upon him, and the burdens of fear that he bore, he could still appreciate a clever stroke. He did not doubt for a moment that Randall spoke the truth. With longing, he thought of the land and the Ottershaw flock, both of which he would dearly love to possess, though he would have no sons to pass them on to, only Elspeth. How would she feel if the grounds of the Nettleburn and of Dyers' Dyke belonged to her, not as tenant but as owner? Surely it would give her great satisfaction and a feeling of accomplishment.

"Would you consider a sale of both the flock and the half-hill grazin's?" said James, knowing full well what the answer would be.

"No, Mister Moodie. But I'll sell you the flock, if we can agree a fair price for it, and I will thereafter honour to the letter the terms of the lease of the grass as settled between my father and yourself."

"I'd pay a top price per acre, laird, to purchase it."

"I'll not cut pieces from Ottershaw if I can avoid it," said Randall. "The land's mine on trust for my sons, if I'm fortunate enough to have any. If not I owe it to my full brother, for Gibbie, as you cannot have failed to notice, is a most successful breeder of children."

"Can I not persuade you?"

"No, Mister Moodie. But you may make me another offer for the Cheviots in the light of the knowledge I've just imparted."

No Cheviots, no grazing land in Balnesmoor; that was the kernel of Randall's negotiation, a tidy piece of extortion but one which would not disadvantage him. On the contrary, possession of the Ottershaw flock would, if the price was right and his deft touch had not deserted him, be a valuable asset in both the short and long term. That was the beauty of Bontine's blackmail. Randall, it seemed, was no addle-pated officer fit only to drink and wench and rattle a sabre. The old laird would have been proud of his son, though perhaps a mite distressed at his lack of ethics.

James said, "What price did you have in mind, laird?"

"Six thousand guineas."

"No, that is really too much," said James. "Not for me but for anyone. Perhaps after lambin' –"

"How much would you pay, now?"

"Assuming the condition of the flock is satisfactory –" said James; he took a long breath, "five thousand an' five hundred pounds – with a proviso."

"What is the proviso?"

"That I may graze the flock in your parks until midsummer."

"Will you pay for the grass?"

"I will," James said.

"In which case I'll accept six thousand pounds for the flock and give you the grazing at no fee until the last September market," said Randall. "I'll also instruct my flock master to attend them as he does now. Six thousand pounds, however, is my bottom price."

"If that's your last word," said James, "I'll agree to pay what you ask. I'll have a note for the full sum delivered to you tomorrow."

The men shook hands to clinch the bargain. Each understood, however, that the handshake would not be the seal on the arrangement, that James would draft a contract of sale, setting out in minute detail the conditions to which the laird had agreed and that, in turn, the terms of the lease would also be revised. But that was lawyer's business and James felt oddly satisfied. He still had the hill strip, which was dear to him, and had acquired the best breeding stock of Cheviots in the west, and at reasonable price too. First thing tomorrow he would send Macfarlane down to examine the lambing ewes and to prepare extra feed in case the weather should suddenly turn hard.

James left Ottershaw with the feeling that the laird and he would rub along well together and that Ottershaw, whatever the tattle-tales said, was in excellent hands. It did not unduly concern the weaver that he had laid out a large sum from working capital and that, if disease or blight struck the flock, he would lose a fortune. He was used to taking such risks. What worried him more was Kennart and the Cunninghams and, though he had made light of it to Bontine, the state of Elspeth's health which, this past fortnight, had become unusually precarious and delicate.

It did not occur to James, who had no experience of such things, that depression and dyspepsia were quite natural conditions in a woman who was eight weeks gone with child.

"Och, Matt, it's hopeless. Let's go home. It's near dark an' I'm frozen."

Anna kept her distance, peering from behind a beech tree, ready to make a dash for it if Matt's temper erupted. His brother and two of his sisters had been about but they had finally wandered off, leaving her alone in this part of the straggle-wood with her husband.

"Perhaps Jacko's found his own way back."

Matt had dragged in about one o'clock in the afternoon. He had said not a word about where he had spent the night but it was clear that he had been drinking heavily. He looked ill, with burnt-cork circles about his eyes and a whey-like complexion that aged him by twenty years. He had been so unwell that he hadn't noticed the platter of food scraps on the doorstep when he reeled into the kitchen.

Anna had blurted out the bad news at once.

To her surprise Matt did not tear his hair or lumber out into the pines. He had slumped at the table and growled at her to make him hot tea and porridge. He had choked down a bowl of thick oatmeal and two cups of scalding tea before he had heaved himself to his feet and, barking at Anna to follow him, had stumbled out in search of his precious monkey.

Sinclairs had been roused from the grieve's cottage to aid in the hunt and Anna was despatched to the foresters' hamlet to see if the creature had been spotted there. McDonald was in bed, though, so ill with drink, said his wife, that he could not come out.

All afternoon Matt scoured the woods and parks, up to the stubble fields that bordered the turnpike, even as far as Balnesmoor itself. Sandy, Matt's young brother, was packed off to Kennart, but returned without news of Jacko. Anna dawdled behind thorn bushes, rested out of the rising wind and gave only a token shout from time to time, "Jacko, Jacko, where are ye?"

Matt addressed the leafless boughs and tangled hedges constantly. But even his cries grew weak and plaintive as the sun dropped behind the hills and the air grew cold.

"He'll come home when he's ready, Matt," Anna said.

"The night air'll kill him."

"He's a monkey. He'll be used t' stayin' out."

"He's a brown capuchin, from the heat o' the jungle."

Matt had brought out a dog to help in the search and the mongrel bayed and snatched at the leash, almost jerking Matt from his feet, as a squirrel fled across the leaf-trash and shot into hiding up a gnarled elm. Matt gentled the dog, did not curse at him. He got down on one knee, shakily, and badgered the brute's ruff, rubbing his unshaven cheek against the wet muzzle.

"Where's Jacko, then, eh? Can ye not find wee Jacko for me?" he begged, hugging the dog to him.

Anna stood back, watching in disgust as her husband sought comfort from the half-wild mongrel which, in response, licked the man's ear consolingly. She could not bear it. She went forward and put her hand on Matt's shoulder.

Furiously he shook her off.

He was weeping as if his heart would break.

"Get awa' from me, Anna," he cried. "You hated him."

"No, Matt. No. He was a wee nuisance at times, but –"

Matt got to his feet. His hair was tousled, his coat prickled with old straw and leaf particles. He smelled as if he had slept in a pig gutter and his despair was pathetic.

She wanted him to cling to her as he had clung to the dog, to seek comfort from her.

"If you're so damned heartless, Anna, awa' ye go back t' the fire. Leave me alone. I'll find him myself."

"He's –" Anna started, then checked. "He's been found by somebody, perhaps, an' you'll get him back tomorrow."

"I think he's dead," said Matt.

He had his back to her again, scanning the dark shadows that had accumulated over the underbrush and that stole in about them stealthily and silently.

"I think I've lost him for ever."

"Matt, please, Matt."

"I loved him so," said Matt Sinclair, crying again.

"I'll buy ye another monkey, Matt."

"Buy! Buy! Do ye think my wee Jacko can be replaced? Och, it hurts. It hurts me t' think he suffered, that he's sufferin' now an' I canna help him."

Weeping uncontrollably, the young man stumbled forward, flinging himself into the thorns that spiked the banking and, with the mongrel trailing at his heels, went up towards the foresters' track, leaving Anna, helpless, behind.

She no longer felt sorry for him, or contrite.

She just wished to God that she had told him the truth; for once, the truth, no matter how much pain it caused.

Cold and hungry, Anna trailed back to Pine Cottage alone.

It was a cold, bleak day for riding out but so great was her husband's enthusiasm that Alicia agreed to accompany him, without promises, on the six-mile drive along the Fintry turnpike.

Alicia was still set against leaving the House of Ottershaw. Even with Randall so indelibly installed and so much in command, Alicia clung to the foolish notion that the new laird might relent and agree to share the mansion with his brother's family. Now, however, there were only a handful of months before the will must be finalised and, with Randall in possession of sufficient funds to pay everybody off, Alicia had been forced to bow to the inevitable.

She had heard, of course, of Strachan Castle. It was no castle at all in the romantic sense of the word, just a plain manor house which, at one period in history, had been gently fortified. It had once been part of the estates of the Longmuirs, wealthy burgesses of Stirling, but they had abandoned it in favour of the large and more habitable Cremanan where they had made their family seat for a century now. In the past hundred years Strachan Castle passed through the hands of many gentlemen farmers and merchants, the last of whom had been the proprietor of a small cotton mill in Fintry, which had mysteriously failed and led to a bankruptcy. For the last seven years Strachan Castle had been inhabited only by an auld wife and her son, caretakers installed by the bank to whom the building belonged, on paper at least.

The situation of the castle was not displeasing. It had a high wall to keep it from falling on to the road, a ring of handsome trees of some antiquity, and a dowelled gate above which, on a shield, was carved a date, 1547. Slightly mollified by the historical connection, older than Ottershaw and the Bontines by a goodly stretch of years, Alicia perked up a little as the carriage rolled into the littered driveway and, bouncing over the frozen ruts, gave her a view of the castle. Her heart sank immediately.

It was hardly more than a rectangle, eighteen or twenty feet wide and some sixty feet in length, graced with a mass of irregular projections and a multitude of windows of all shapes and sizes. It was the lack of neatness, of trimness, that there and then turned Alicia against poor Strachan Castle. She could tell at a glance that she would never be able to plane and pare and polish the building to her satisfaction and that, short of pulling most of it down, it would never have the chiselled regularity of an Ottershaw, that noble architectural profile which was essential in a gentleman's domicile. Indeed, the solid, ramshackle appearance of Strachan Castle was just what Alicia would have expected a burgess of Stirling to build and choose to live in.

"Does it not look homely, dearest?" said Gilbert, at her side. "Can you not see the children frolicking upon the lawn?"

The lawn was being grazed by two dun cows whose droppings had coagulated the carpet of leaves and whose hoofs had chopped the grass into a quagmire. Nose high and eyebrows higher, Alicia gave her husband no answer. She dreaded the thought of beginning a new life here. It seemed so very, very far from Ottershaw, though a fit young shepherd could have walked it in an hour.

"A round tower too," said Gilbert, as the carriage stopped and the foot-servant leapt to check the horses. "I always think that round towers have a pictorial advantage over the square variety."

The round tower, to Alicia's eyes, was hardly bigger than a candle and seemed to be affixed to the corner of the south front only by creeping ivy.

"It leans, Gilbert," she remarked, since her husband obviously required some sort of comment from her before he would be at peace.

She was helped down from the carriage, so muffled in clothes that she could hardly move her knees or elbows and could not feel Gilbert's arm about her as he escorted her towards the doorway which lay flat to the drive and had a gap beneath it large enough to admit a deerhound. The door opened at the Bontines' approach and the caretaker, followed by her mutton-headed son, emerged cautiously as if she expected Gilbert to begin beating her with a stick there and then.

"Ah! Mistress McAndles?"

"Aye, sir."

"I believe Mister Taylor of the Merchant Banking House of Falkirk indicated that we would be calling upon you."

"T' tak' the hoose awa'," said the auld wife, in an accent almost unintelligible. "T' tak the roof frae' o'er oor heids."

The son, who was taller than Gilbert and as broad as an elm, grunted threateningly.

Gilbert released Alicia and glanced back at the driver and foot-servant from Ottershaw, who braced themselves in case of a squabble.

Gilbert said, "It's not my intention to take Strachan Castle away, Mistress McAndles, but rather to occupy it, to bring my family to live in it."

"Wi' a wheen o' servants skitterin' aboot ma feet," the old woman mumbled.

In issues small as well as large Alicia's response to being obstructed was immediate and consistent. She pushed past her husband and squared up to the woman.

"Out of my way or I shall have my driver throw you out, you and that male person who's hiding behind your skirts."

The male person sank swiftly into the gloom of the hall and, in the course of the hour that followed, did not show himself again. It was a tiny thing, but valuable to Alicia Bontine, this prospect of evicting the old woman and her lumpish son, throwing them out along with musty bedding, broken stools and warped panels! It would be her first act should she become mistress of Strachan Castle.

Alicia, with Gilbert following, stalked into the castle like an invader. Her mood had changed. She experienced an angry determination, a response to challenge which had little to do with the castle itself. Indeed, she might almost have preferred it to be in a worse state of repair than it turned out to be, for it was sound enough and surprisingly dry, though it had not been thoroughly fired for many years. Alicia did not invite the old caretaker to show her about the apartments and corridors. She trotted on, chin up, eyes glittering.

"So this is where he would have us live, is it?" she snapped. "So it is to this pile that Randall would condemn us."

"I don't believe Randall –"

"Out of his sight, out of his caring."

"If you don't like the place –"

Alicia's voice echoed in a stone-arched tunnel that led down towards the servants' hall which, suitably, thought Alicia, was buried deep beneath the house, a large, stone-walled, stone-floored cellar with larders and pot-cupboards and a warren of small rooms off it. She sniffed at the cooking-fires, the ovens and the tubs. She recoiled from the interior water-closet, gave a scream of sheer revulsion at the sight of the caretakers' cubby. It would necessitate a woman to exercise a will of iron to make the barren building into a proud home.

Round the stone stairs and up again, through the long, not ill-proportioned dining-hall, up the main flight to the first floor of bedrooms and other appointments and above it still to a clutter of little attics and turret rooms, Alicia went, expressing her despair of ever making the place habitable and fit for a noble family.

"Open it, Gilbert."

Gilbert, who had said not a word to interrupt Alicia's flood of protest and disapproval, fought with the iron ring of the tower door; at least he thought it was the tower door for, so rapid had been his wife's tour, that he had lost his bearings. The door cracked open, creaked on mighty hinges and admitted light and cold air. He drew it inwards with all his strength and let Alicia poke her head outside.

"Roof," she said.

The door opened from the east side of the tower. A short flight of stone steps led down to a balustraded walk that gave access to the ramped tile of the roof or, more accurately, to the roofs.

"How convenient!" Gilbert said.

"It must be locked fast to prevent the children straying and falling," said Alicia and brushed past Gibbie and set off downstairs once more.

A quarter of an hour later Alicia emerged on the run from the main door, the old caretaker bowing and scraping obsequiously as the lady flurried away.

Alicia walked straight past the waiting carriage and half-way down the untidy drive, then swung round so suddenly that she might have been trying to catch the castle unawares, sticking its tongue out rudely at her back or winking its assorted eyes.

Breathlessly Gilbert caught up with her.

"Well, dearest?" he ventured.

"Is it for sale?"

"It is available on a ninety-nine-year lease."

"What do we purchase, in that case?"

"The lease."

"Ninety-nine years? Will that be long enough?"

"For what, Alicia?"

The woman snorted, amused at her own little joke.

She said, "Have it examined from top to bottom, Gilbert. If you find that it will not crumble in the first blast of storm or sink beneath the weight of our feet, attend to the lease."

"Take it, do you mean?"

"Precisely."

"Alicia, are you sure that –"

"I am sure that we will find no better on our pittance."

"Oh, I imagine that there are –"

"No better, closer to Ottershaw."

"But you have neglected to ask me –"

"I assume that we can afford it, Gilbert, or you would not have brought me here, beaming and gleeful as you are. I am left to conclude that you are in favour of acquiring this dwelling?"

"Yes, I think so. Yes."

"When may we occupy it?'

"Almost at once," said Gilbert.

"As your wife I have little say in the matter, I suppose. If you are content to bring us here, I shall not impede you."

"Alicia, we are partners in marriage and in life. It's not my intention to take you to a place where you will be miserable."

"It is not Ottershaw."

"I cannot give you Ottershaw."

"Then this old castle will suffice," said Alicia, "until such times as we can reclaim your rightful inheritance."

"Ninety-nine years?" said Gilbert.

It was now Alicia's turn to miss the point of the joke.

In spite of herself Anna was concerned about her husband. She had enquired from the stable lads if they had seen aught of Matt on Sunday night, if, perhaps, he had stolen a bed in the hay-loft, but the boys met her with an insolent blankness. Questions to the horse-men received no more informative replies and it was not until she encountered Brigit Tomelty upon the back stairs that, from an unexpected source, she found out that Matt had spent the night at McDonald's and had gone directly to work.

"How d' you know, Brigit?"

"I heard. From m' daddy."

Anna suspected nothing. Brigit was famous as a fount of information. "Would ye happen to know if Matt was wi' McDonald on Saturday night as well?"

"Drinkin'," said Brigit, inscrutably. "I hear the monk ran off an' got lost. Matt would be fair grieved."

"Aye, he was," said Anna.

"You never likit the beastie, though, so it canna have hurt you much, Anna."

"I wouldn't have wantit to see it dead."

"So it's dead for certain, is it?"

"It wouldn't survive the nights, so Matt said." Brigit's questions made her uncomfortable. "But I expect that daft man o' mine will search 'til summer comes."

"I canna imagine carin' for anythin' as much as that," Brigit remarked and, hoisting up the blankets which she had brought from the master's room, went on downstairs.

Anna's allotted task that Monday morning was menial but not strenuous. She would trim all the candles in the corridors and collect the parings for melting and remoulding. At least she would be on the same floor as Randall and would not be supervised.

During the course of the morning she saw nothing of the laird. Three of Mr Gibbie's children stampeded down the long west corridor at one point but they ignored Anna as if she were only a piece of furniture and even the nursery-maid said not a word as she hurried past in pursuit of her autocratic charges.

At first Anna's thoughts turned on the events of the weekend. If Jacko's body was discovered Matt would assume that she had murdered the wee brute and would whip her without mercy. In fact Anna attributed to her husband a far greater degree of viciousness than he possessed. He had slapped her only three or four times, leaving bruises but no injury. Wives in the villages suffered far worse than Anna from hot-tempered husbands and not a few were treated hardly better than cattle.

The corridor turned into a sort of cul-de-sac where a tall window overlooked the park. There was one iron holder bracketed to the wall holding a single, hardly-used tallow. Anna shaved the caked rim of the holder, then, with bowl in hand, stood idly by the window gazing out at the view.

Cheviots clustered under the boughs where dry crests of crop might be found. Pheasants strutted near the oaks, safe in the home park where shooting, even by the laird, was considered unsportsmanlike. It was a strange, sad sort of day, missing the russet sunshine. Mammy would have revelled in such January weather. She would have got her girls active and packed them off to repair fences or hedges or turn the potato drills. Anna would have felt fresh and strong and would have had an appetite like a tigress. After supper, though, by the flicker of the fire she would have been all pleasantly dozy and Mammy would not have scolded her but would have let her nap undisturbed in the chair.

Anna sighed. Life as a young girl on the Nettleburn seemed, in retrospect, more contented than it had been at the time.

She wondered what her sister might be doing right now; not wicking candles, whatever else. Elspeth would probably be taking morning tea, Kerr serving her from a huge silver pot while 'Pet swanned on the sofa with a new novel on her lap.

Anna sighed again.

"Sinclair, Sinclair." Dunn's shrill summons shook Anna from her reverie. "Master has need o' you."

Dunn had become quite high and mighty of late and had even tried to lord it over Mr Hunter until he got a clout on the lug to remind him of his place. Even so, Anna laid down the candle stuff on the floor and hurried to the door of the library.

"Tak' awa' the dinner-plates," Dunn told her.

"Is he in there?" Anna mouthed.

"Aye, the laird is in residence."

Anna went into the library.

A hot fire roared in the hearth to dispel the gloom of the winter's day and the laird was standing before it. Watching her. Anna flushed as she transferred plates and cutlery from table to tray. A dish of potatoes had hardly been touched and there was a joint of prime roast beef with a bone-handled carving-knife stuck in it. Pink gravy oozed from the blade and formed a succulent little puddle about the base of the roast. Anna had a ridiculous urge to tear off a piece with her fingers and stuff it immediately into her mouth. Instead, she dropped a curtsy to Randall and, treading warily, carried the tray out of the room. Dunn closed the door behind her.

Anna glanced left and right. The corridor was deserted. She leaned forward and touched her tongue to the plate, sipping the delicious gravy as a kitten will sup milk.

She carried the tray to the back stairs, opened the door with her hip, slid through. She put the tray down on the step, fished on tiptoe for the cog she had hidden on the shelf over the door, then changed her mind. She had no need of the cog. She cut four slices from the roast with the carving-knife, licked them clean and inserted them into her secret pocket. What a fine feast she would make of them tonight. Lifting the tray she made her way down into the kitchen.

Mrs Lacy was busy with pans at the fire. No other servants were in the kitchen. Anna did not notice Hunter at first as she made on towards the pot-room where the crocks were washed.

She did not reach the pot-room.

Mr Hunter was suddenly before her, barring her escape.

Anna, with a stab of pure fear, realised she had been caught.

Cook glared at Anna, her fat upper lip twisted in disgust.

"Put the tray down, girl," Mr Hunter told her.

She wanted to throw the tray at his sleek head, to dart away through the yard door and flee into the trees. She could throw away the bloody roast beef. Nobody would be able to prove that she had been stealing. Hunter caught her arm, swung the tray and laid it on the baking-table.

Still holding her fast, Hunter stooped, peered at the beef and sniffed it as if the very aroma were measurable.

"I'm surprised. I am surprised," the steward said. "The daughter of Gaddy Patterson, a thief. The kin of our dear grieve, a pilferer."

"I don't know what you mean," said Anna defiantly.

Somehow she kept her hands from flying to the secret pocket. She planted her fists on her hips and met Hunter's melancholy eye challengingly.

"Candidly, I thought it was Tomelty. It would not have surprised me if it'd been Tomelty. But you, Sinclair!"

"Are you accusin' me of somethin', Mister Hunter?"

"Do you think comestibles grow on trees, lass? Do you think I do not know how much is prepared an' how much consumed? Do you deny that you have been stealin' food?"

"I do deny it. I've no need t' steal food."

"The beef was put out as a trap at the laird's suggestion."

"At the laird's –" Anna made herself silent.

"Clever mannie," the cook interjected. "Mister Hunter, here's the scale."

In horror Anna watched Mrs Lacy hold out a measure bowl manacled to a thin chain, the chain to the balance. Three small dairy-weights were already in the dish. Without awaiting Hunter's instruction the cook lifted the roast from the platter and placed it in the empty bowl.

Mrs Lacy extended the scales between finger and thumb. For an instant beef and brass weights held in perfect apposition then the weighted dish sank with a clink, leaving the roast high above it.

"How much, Mrs Lacy?" said Hunter gravely.

"Four slices'd be my estimate."

"Where are they, Sinclair?" said Hunter.

Anna did not answer.

"Have you eaten them already?"

Anna pursed her lips.

"Take her upstairs," said Mrs Lacy.

"If you've concealed them on your person," said Hunter, "it'd be wiser, lass, to divulge them here an' now."

"The laird said he'd deal wi' her," Mrs Lacy reminded the steward.

From the mouth of the servants' hall Anna heard giggles and whispers from other maids and, in that period of extreme tension, heard Brigit's thick laughter; even Brigit, her friend, took malicious pleasure in her downfall.

"What – what'll happen to me –" Anna stammered, "supposin' I had been stealin' food?"

"We'll let Sir Randall decide your punishment," said Hunter.

"Very well," said Anna. "Take me t' the laird then."

Gasps from the corridor, shocked faces, blurs of white in the gloom; Hunter turned Anna by the shoulder and pushed her towards the back stairs.

Anna was afraid of Hunter, afraid of the cook, afraid of Alicia Bontine and even of Drayer, the senior parlour-maid who had been at Ottershaw longer than anyone. But she was not afraid of the laird.

"Watch what ye do, Mister Hunter," she snapped at the steward as he pushed her with his knees. "What if the laird finds I've done nothin' wrong?"

"Sinclair, I've had ye markit as a spoiled brat since first ye marrit young Matt," Hunter told her, without the benefit of his polite accent. "Ye'll not get slippit o' this piece of mischief, I'll promise."

She fought him, seizing his arms, asked the question straight to his face. "What can you do t' me? Throw me out? I wouldn't care a toss if ye did."

Hunter was relieved of giving answer to an awkward question by the appearance of Dunn at the door to the landing.

"The laird's waitin'," the boy said gloatingly.

Seconds later Anna was bundled into the library and released from Hunter's hold.

She flounced and straightened.

Randall stood before the fireplace, a thin cane in his left hand. He leaned his weight slightly into it. He had on a frilled shirt, open at the throat, and a leather half-vest. Breeches of heavy grey linen, hitched high and tight, showed the contours of his body. He looked as smooth and hard as a stone from the Nettleburn.

"How did the scales tip, Hunter?"

"Meat has been taken, sir."

"She did not filch the whole roast then?"

"She's too wily for that, sir. Just a few fat slices, so it seems."

"Has she confessed?"

Anna threw the laird his answer. "I have nothin' to confess."

"Has the meat been discovered, Hunter?"

"As you ordered, sir, the culprit was brought here t' you."

"Has she not been searched?"

"No, sir. Shall I be sendin' for Mistress Lacy, or Drayer?"

"She shall not be searched. It smacks too much of criminal arrest, and this is only a crime against the good order of my house."

"What shall we do, laird?" said Hunter.

"Leave her with me," said Randall. "I shall persuade her to tell me the truth. If she is properly repentant then I shall mete out a just punishment, one which will not deprive her of her position, however, or bring shame to the Sinclairs."

"Beggin' the laird's pardon, would it not be for the best to send for the grieve, let him stand with you while the truth is uncovered?"

"No, Hunter. Not for the world would I subject Sinclair to such an ordeal. It'll be enough that he hears of it when it is resolved," said Randall. "It will be over and settled in a matter of minutes if the girl is honest and open."

"Speak up, you." Hunter dug Anna with his elbow.

Anna jerked away from the steward. What Hunter might suspect in the laird's personal intervention in domestic drama Anna knew to be a fact. She surmised that Randall wanted power over her, wanted her to submit to him as she had done once before.

"I have nothin' to say," Anna declared.

"Leave us, Hunter. Take Dunn downstairs with you."

"Beggin' the laird's pardon," said Hunter once more, "but I'm afeared I must take it upon myself to enquire what it is you intend, sir, since it is incumbent upon me to look out for the welfare o' the female servants."

It was courageous of Hunter to speak out. Old Sir Gibbie would not have needed to be reminded of the tradition that the steward of a house was responsible for protecting servants against masters, as well as the *vice* and the *versa* of it. It was a duty so little exercised that Tolland, for example, would not have considered it at all.

"No harm will befall her, Hunter, you have my word. I am no Caligula, you know."

Hunter, never having heard of the mannie to whom the laird referred, looked as blank as a piece of slate.

"Leave us, Hunter."

Steering Dunn by the shoulder, as if he were a culprit too, Hunter left the library, closed the door and made a loud enough noise in the corridor to indicate that he had heeded the laird's command to the letter and had in fact gone downstairs.

Randall made no move towards Anna. He contemplated her for a moment or two, head on one side, then he seated himself on a lidded log-box which flanked the hearth.

"I spoke with your brother-in-law yesterday," said Randall, quite casually, while Anna stood on the carpet by the table and tried not to appear reckless. "He's such a sensible fellow."

"Aye, he can afford t' be," said Anna.

"You're not poor," said Randall, "nor are you ill-sustained. Did you steal titbits from my tray?"

"Aye, laird."

"Including the delicious roast beef I lunched upon this noon?"

"Aye, laird."

"Have you eaten it?"

"I took a taste, that's all."

"Come now, Anna, a taste would hardly tip Mistress Lacy's scales."

"Was it your – the laird's idea t' set a trap?"

"Oh, Hunter came to me in such a fly of feathers, clucking like a damned hen about pilfering – he's still used to having Mistress Alicia count every morsel, I expect – that I had to show myself cunning. It wasn't at all a bad ruse. Saw it used by a quartermaster-cook in a barracks in Perth some years ago. But, of course, the soldier was hungry. And the punishment far outweighed the crime."

"What – what happened t' the soldier?"

"Shot," said Randall without the trace of a smile.

"Dead, sir?" said Anna. "For stealin'?"

"He could no longer be trusted, do you see?"

"Well, you'll not be shootin' me," said Anna, who was not naïve enough, as some of the maids would have been, to be at all frightened by the laird's story of rough military justice.

"But you admit to stealing?"

"To takin' a wee taste of the leftovers, aye."

"I swear," said Randall, with a sigh, "that you are making it unnecessarily difficult for me to get to the bottom of this business."

"You could dismiss me from service," Anna suggested.

Anna too had relaxed a little. She was inclined to believe that the scheme had been naught but an excuse for him to get her alone, to speak with her in friendly, bantering fashion. She remembered the kiss, however, the sensuality of it and how this same man had taken advantage of two young girls for his pleasure.

"Is that what you wish me to do? Send you back to the dairy, or to field work? Do you prefer the byre to the house, Anna?"

"No, laird."

"Very well. Where is my beef? Do not pretend that you ate it all. I know that to be a lie, unless you swallowed it whole, like a python," Randall said. "It's my guess you've hidden it."

Bathed by the warmth of the fire Anna felt hot all over.

"Come here," Randall said.

She moved without reluctance so that she stood close enough for him to touch her without stretching far.

Quietly he asked, "Do you want me to search for it? Do you want me to find it?"

He placed his hands about her waist and drew her to him. His knees brushed against her thighs and closed slightly, pinning her. He put a knuckle under her chin and tipped her face up so that she was looking straight into his eyes.

"I think you've a secret, Anna, a little secret pocket and that if I look I shall find it," he murmured. "Is that not so?"

"Aye."

"Where then is it?" Randall said. "Is it here?" He placed a hand softly upon her breast. "Is it here, perhaps?" He placed a hand now upon her stomach, touching her with a little more pressure, a brushing stroke, not quite intimate. "Must I search more closely still?"

Anna leaned against him. "Stop it."

She had intended to be furious but his caress had drained her of determination. She had dreamed for four years of this moment without ever really believing that it would become a reality. She longed for him with every fibre of her being.

"Stop it," she whispered. "Please, don't make a sport of it."

"Ah!" Randall exclaimed. "You're not a child now, is that it?"

"I know what you want of me but you mustn't make a sport of it."

"What do I want of you, Anna?"

"To – to love me."

"What do you say to that?"

By way of answer Anna pressed herself against him, arms about his shoulders. She sensed shock in him as her lips fastened upon his and her fingers touched his hair.

He drew back sharply.

"I do want you, Anna. But you've taught me a lesson. It cannot be a command or a punishment or a foolish piece of play. I've thought of you, yes, so many times – the girl in the woods, eager and bold and young."

She kissed him again, with a release of passion that swept away calculation. His body was lean, not thick like Matt's, his hands quiet and gentle upon her, not grabbing and rough.

"I've thought of you also, night an' day," Anna confessed.

"But you have a husband."

"Under this roof," said Anna, "I've no husband, no master but you."

"In conscience, Anna, think for your own good what you are doing."

"I dinna care."

"Tomorrow you might care very much."

"Do you care?"

"Anna, if you bore me or displease me, I'll soon be rid of you, make no mistake on that score."

"What if I never bore you, never do anythin' but please you?"

Randall got to his feet. He snuggled his arm about her waist and held her against him.

"Do you not mind what they'll say about you?" he asked.

"No."

"In which case," said Randall, "damn them."

"But – but what'll Mister Hunter –"

"Do you wish to wait, to put it off, Anna?"

"No."

"Then let Hunter think what he likes. Let them all think what they like. To the devil with them and the consequences."

"Where are you takin' me?" Anna asked.

"To bed, of course," said Randall Bontine.

SEVEN

Chance and Necessity

Winter came late to the Lowlands of Scotland. In the first few days of February tales of heavy snowfalls and piercing frosts filtered down from the north. Scarf, in the course of his duties as James Moodie's agent, was in contact with trade travellers and heard the stories at the mart in Dunblane. He made certain that Mr Moodie was informed immediately in order that the weaver might prepare his holdings for the siege that would surely come.

Feed was bought from those daft enough to sell it. Straw was baled up for warm penning. Shepherds who tended Moodie's flocks were ordered to draw the muttons off the upper slopes and cluster them within reach of habitation. Some early ewes, those that grazed the floor of the strath, were due to drop in three weeks, a process which could not be left to nature if blizzards were in the offing. James did not stand about in the face of the reports wringing his hands and praying that his small pocket would be spared the punishments that snow and ice could inflict. He made sure that he and his hirelings were ready for the worst.

James had been out all day long, not in the gig or cabriolet but on horseback. He hated riding but found it convenient to get about the grazings at a gallop and change mounts at various stations along the circular route he had mapped out before he left Moss House. He was wrapped in heavy woollens, thick and cumbersome as armour, which chafed his skin and added to the discomfort of licking over bone-frosted roads and tracks. There was no sense of manly adventure in the trail, not for James Moodie, though he did not shirk or delegate this necessary duty.

The mere sight of the weaver thundering down the path was enough to stir the most lax of hired wool-growers into a fever of activity for fear that he would be stripped of shearing fees and lose his 'arrangement' on the spot. Mr Rudge could be cajoled from too close an inspection of flocks and premises by a tankard of mulled wine or the attentions of a pretty young lassie. Mr Scarf could be won round by spinning a tearful yarn about illness and disaster. But James Simpson Moodie's heart was as flinty as his stare and he brooked no excuse for laziness and indifferent tending. Besides, he appeared so rarely on outlying patches that a visit from him was like having Apollyon swoop down into your yard on wings of fire.

Even the best of herdsmen and breeders felt their bowels clench with fear when the cry came, "God, but it's Moodie! Aye, but it's Moodie himsel'." In Kennart too the advent of the master created a bit of a stir. Within the long building fingers flew a little faster and the chuckle of bobbins, chatter of shuttles and the slap-whack of battens increased with the whisper that Moodie had crossed the bridge or climbed the stairs to Rudge's office.

On that February afternoon, however, James did not ride into Kennart to whip up his weavers. Only a handful o womenfolk even knew that he was in the vicinity for he arrived at the Cunninghams' shop by the quiet path round the base of Rowan Hill.

Veterans of the Glasgow markets, George and Trina were well aware that large profits could be made in periods o scarcity. Against the sting in winter's tail, therefore, the couple had piled all the stock they could afford. Cottage and shop groaned with barrels, jars, boxes and sacks. Even the couple's bed in the half-loft was padded like a redoubt with containers.

The folk of Kennart had quickly grown accustomed to find fare and the women blessed the Cunninghams for easing their burden at the stove, even if it did cost money. With each passing week more and more weavers' chink found its way into the Cunninghams' coffers. One commodity – naturally – sold better than all the others put together; and that commodity was drink.

George had acquired a licence, through the offices of his landlord, James Simpson Moodie, though he had dispensed whisky and gin without the benefit of paper quite happily. Tomelty's malt sold like wildfire, a generous dram for a penny a price not matched by the Ramshead or the Black Bull o even by the Bell Tree in Drymen. What was even more appealing was that spirits could be purchased on credit.

Women as well as men took full advantage of the slate and would gaggle about the lighted shop at all hours and dare each other to consume cup after cup of gin. Several times Baynham had to break up brawls between members of the fair sex, a chore which he did not relish since he usually got his face raked or his shins kicked and could not bring himself to use his mallet on a lassie no matter how sorely he was provoked. Young men thought it a great laugh and egged the girls on, buying them more tipple on credit in the hope that they would toss all their inhibitions aside and grant free sexual favours indiscriminately.

Some stolid craftsmen frowned on this debauchery and made formal complaints to Mr Rudge. But Rudge was a sensualist and viewed the goings-on with indulgent interest and had even taken advantage of them now and again. It was not the complaints of a handful of moral-minded weavers that brought James to Kennart but a letter that had been delivered to Moss House, a letter penned by Mr George Cunningham no less, one of several.

Cunningham was serving behind a wooden counter which barred the front of the shop when James arrived. He wore the familiar pea-jacket and muffler, had his pipe in his mouth. Four wives and one old man were gathered before the shop sampling wee tin cups of 'blue ruin', unfiltered gin. Some of the women were also nibbling almond cakes, hot from Trina's oven, but within seconds of James's arrival the customers had vanished down the road to the village, leaving the area of the shop deserted.

"It's yourself, is it, Mister Moodie?" boomed George Cunningham. "How kind o' ye to drop in."

Stiffly James dismounted and tied his horse to a post.

"Aye, seems we're in for a grim spell," said Cunningham. "Come in by an' warm yoursel', Mister Moodie."

James slipped through the 'gate' by the end of the counters and threaded his way through the sacks and boxes.

Cunningham had erected an iron brazier at the back of the shed with a chimney vent above it and the fire in the grate's belly burned yellow and inviting. On a griddle hooked close to the brazier were two big tin jugs and, in a twinkling, Cunningham had concocted a steaming cup of whisky-toddy which he handed over to the weaver. James drank it gratefully and accepted a second, holding it in his fingers while the warmth seeped into him.

From the tiny doorway into the cottage Trina Cunningham appeared. She looked more robust than ever, with her sleeves rolled to the elbows and all covered in flour. Her cheeks glowed cherry from her efforts over the oven fire indoors and, even to James, the establishment at the bottom of Rowan Hill had an alluring atmosphere of plenteous comfort to it, an oasis in the leaden landscape.

"Pie, Mister Moodie?" the woman chirruped.

The weaver, hugging the fire in the rear of the shop, shook his head. He drank the second toddy and returned the cup to Cunningham. "I'm here in response to your letters, particularly the last."

Trina Cunningham came forth, wiping her hands on her sackcloth apron and taking from a tray a nip of gin which she knocked backward into her mouth as casually as she drew breath.

"We are, as you can see, sir, well settled here," said Cunningham. "Our wares are verra popular wi' the weavers."

"Much savin' they make on fuel an' on time," put in Trina.

"I gathered as much by the sum you sent me through Mister Rudge. I take it that you didn't smear the figures. I have no means of checking your profits, of course, as you are well aware."

"Did it seem niggardly, Mister Moodie?" Trina Cunningham asked, with a slight note of acerbity. "Did it seem we was smearin' the figures?"

"Was that the reason you asked me to call?"

"No," said George Cunningham. "It has to do wi' the impendin' hard weather which, if you'll cast your glance to the door, you'll see has commencit."

It had, indeed, begun to snow.

"Come to it, Cunningham," James growled.

"We have a slate o' debtors," said Cunningham.

"If you give credit, that is not my concern."

"It cheats you o' profit too, Mister Moodie."

"Och, they pay," said Trina. "Most o' them."

"But?" James asked.

"But we could benefit them more if we could extend their credit further," said Cunningham.

"Extend? I don't take your meanin'," James said.

"Trina, fetch the slates."

There were four boards, long, rough-edged slabs of roofing slate, bought perhaps from the quarries near Balfron or from one of the pedlars who carted such material from the north. Chalk markings were thick upon the surfaces, like runic commemorations. There was, of course, nothing mystical in the meaning of the signs. George Cunningham could decipher them with ease which he proceeded to do, tolling off in a dry voice the names of Moodie's employees and the sums they owed.

"Aye, I've a picture of what you mean," James interrupted. "But what does it have to do with me? I'm not responsible for how you run your trade, Cunningham."

"One week's wage on average is our allowance," said the woman. "It's all they can be trustit for, ye see."

"But they don't pay us as they should. They don't pay a standin' week all at once," said George Cunningham. "In consequence o' which we have to deny them their provisions and touches o' pleasure."

"Meaning drink, I suppose," James said.

"Can ye deny them as works so hard a touch o' warmth in this bitter weather?" said Trina.

"Do you want me to supply drink, is that it?"

George Cunningham took the pipe from his mouth, spat into the brazier, then laughed. "Aye, you'd be a memorable master if ye did that, Mister Moodie. But no, what we have in mind t' suggest is that we give the slate every week t' Mister Rudge and –"

"Deduct the owing from the family's earnings?" said James. "I envisage nothing but animosity and bitterness coming my way from that. I'd be accused of paying them with one hand and taking it away with the other. They'd forget that they had supped well, had their taste o' whisky or can of ale. They'd see only pennies in their hands, think of the labour and convince themselves I had somehow cheated them of their entitled earnings."

"We'd see nobody starve," said Trina. "We'd extend their borrowin' week upon week, as needed."

Emphatically James shook his head. "I've never approved of such systems. They're but a step from not paying out coin at all."

"Many o' your weavers are paid by the piece, are they not?" Cunningham asked.

"Of course."

"Then they will surely work the harder an' slip more cloth from the treadles."

"See, Mister Moodie, how you'll gain from both ends."

"You've been in Kennart but four short months and already you're tellin' me how I should run my manufactory. Damn it, did I not give you all that you asked for? It isn't to be enough, it seems. Now you insist that I introduce a barter system and encourage my workers to indulge themselves beyond their capacity to pay, so they can shovel money into your pockets."

"An' your pocket too, Mister Moodie," Trina reminded him.

"The truck system works fine in big cotton mills," said Cunningham. "It's the accepted method in the coal-diggin's. I've heard men say they prefer it."

"I question if they prefer it," said James. "I suspect they're so enthralled by it that they do not realise how it makes slaves of them. God, but men are foolish enough to trade their souls for immediate satisfaction of an appetite."

"Souls!" snorted Trina. "If they have souls at all, sir, they should be barterin' wi' a minister an' not wi' honest shopkeepers like ourselves."

"Is this the point of all your letters to me, to force me to agree to the establishment of a truck system, committing my workers to spend their wages at your shop?"

"It's here they spend anyroads," said Trina.

"I feel you'd do well t' consider our suggestion at leisure, Mister Moodie."

James said, "Have you spoken to Rudge?"

"Nah, nah!" said Trina. "He's but a lackey."

"Mister Rudge is my appointed agent in Kennart."

"Maybe so," said Cunningham. "But I doubt, sir, if Mister Rudge understands commerce as we do. I doubt if he ever trudged the city's streets when he was a raw lad, peddlin' his wares round the keepers' an' the backs o' inns an' taverns."

"As you had t' do, Mister Moodie," added Trina, in case the weaver had missed the point.

"Very well," James said. "But now you have spoken with me on the matter – and I've given my refusal. I shan't change my opinion of the truck system, even on reflection."

"Ye might, Mister Moodie," said the woman, "if ye saw that it benefited the poor an' needy an' those poor weak creatures who fall into sore distress."

"I cannot see it," said James. "I see only how it would benefit you, Mistress Cunningham."

"Perhaps your lady wife – Miss Elspeth – perhaps she could explain it to ye," said Trina.

"She knows nothin' of such affairs."

"Then she's lucky," said Trina.

"Understandably protectit from the harsh realities o' life," said Cunningham. "But if she had seen what we have seen, she might favour any system which gave succour when it was required."

"It pains us t' send awa' a hungry lassie," said Trina Cunningham.

Apparently the thought was painful enough to require another nip of gin imbibed at lightning speed.

"Surely," said James, more cautiously, "you do not need my answer immediately?"

"Afore the snow comes would be welcome," said Cunningham.

Snow had already come, winding down over the ridge of the hill and washing out the line of the trees a half-mile distant. James's horse shivered, stamped, sneezed and tugged at the post-rein as if it wanted away from Kennart and into shelter before the fall thickened.

Cunningham took the pipe from his mouth again. He rested his buttocks against a box of Macready Import tea which saddled two sacks of rice and a small dump of sugar. "Perhaps, sir, I could tak' a stroll up t' Moss House tomorrow morn – if the weather permits – an' explain how it is wi' poor folk."

"I need no explanations," said James.

"To your wife – Miss Elspeth," Trina said.

"Mistress Moodie. She's married to me."

"Sure, it's a natural mistake, Mister Moodie," said Trina, "arisin' from a natural confusion."

"However slight her interest in commerce," put in Cunningham, "I'm certain she'd be interested t' meet somebody who knew her dear departit mother."

"Two peas in a pod," said Trina. "Mother as pretty as daughter, though she's been dead these twenty year, poor deceived lassie, dead an' buried under a flat stone, like as not, in some parish kirkyard."

"A stranger's grave," said Cunningham.

"How unfair, when Bell was no stranger at all."

Crossing and cutting, the flakes and ivory shadows of flakes swirled thick and fast on fluctuating wind. The bare-branched rowans quivered in the blizzard mist which, steadying again, hung like a massive curtain across the land, shutting out all sight, all sound.

James took up a third hot tin cup from the griddle by the brazier and drank the contents while he stared out at the snow.

By his left hand, stuck in a coil of black tobacco, was a sharp little dagger, honed on both sides of the blade. By his right hand, where he could pluck it up without stretching, a sack-grapple lay on the counter, its flattened hook fit to smash bone with a blow. James's fingers trembled as he brought the cup to his mouth and stared out at the muffling silence. One blow with the grapple and Cunningham would fall at his feet. Then the knife, plunging into the side of the fat woman's throat, ripping this way and that until her pig-squeals ceased and the snow ate up the moans.

He closed both fists about the cup.

Hollowly he said, "How – how would the system be run?"

"Simply, sir," said Cunningham.

Implacably James Moodie listened while, in a matter of a minute or so, George Cunningham explained how he would rook the poor weavers and their wives through the office of Mr Rudge and the services of McAlpin. Implacably James Moodie nodded.

He said, "Perhaps, after all, a trial would be feasible; a trial only."

"Shall we say a quarter, Mister Moodie?"

"Yes."

"An' you'll tell Mister Rudge?"

"Yes."

"A taste more toddy, afore ye ride home t' your wife?"

"No," said James. "No, thank you."

And then he left the couple, mounted the wet saddle and guided the horse down on to the snow-shrouded track to the village, to Rudge's office where he must humiliate himself before the manager and the manager's clerk by passing off the Cunninghams' orders exactly as if they were his own.

Since the last Sabbath in January, when she had attended kirk with James, Elspeth had not crossed the doorstep of Moss House. Her indisposition had furnished her with a ready-made excuse for low spirits. She had not been silly enough to ascribe the pangs and pressures that stirred in her body to a broken heart, however. She was only too well aware that she had conceived and that the baby must be approaching the third month of its growth.

As befitted a young woman who had been well educated, Elspeth had gone quietly into James's library and had consulted a book which detailed the meaning of the changes and explained the signs and symptoms of pregnancy. Knowledge rendered her less uncertain, less afraid. In a month or so her abdomen would show a swelling to match that of her enlarged and tender breasts. At least she was spared the need to hide her condition from James who had never looked upon her unclad figure.

The pregnancy distracted her from the misery that followed Michael's death. There could be no shadow of doubt that Michael had fathered the baby. He had come into her life as lightly as a gadfly and had gone out of it in a similar manner. She could not convince herself that he had gone from her for ever, such had been the scattered manner of their friendship.

Janet Blaven had informed her by letter that her nephew had died and had been carried for interment to St Cyrus kirkyard in Glasgow. There he was laid beside his beloved mother and the little sisters who had preceded him into God's abiding peace. One day, Elspeth promised herself, one day in the spring season she would find an excuse for travelling alone to Glasgow and would kneel by Michael's grave and pour out her heart to him, would tell him about their child, knowing that he would be glad. It was the only ray of consolation in that time of sorrow, the knowledge that Michael, not James, had fathered her child.

Soon, very soon, she would have to confront James with the truth. She had no inkling as to how he would react. In the past few months James had become unpredictable and Elspeth realised that she would be placing her husband in an appalling dilemma. How could he cast her from him, disown the child as a bastard, without admitting to the world at large that he had failed in his husbandly role? Only James and she shared the secret that he could not claim paternity because he had never fulfilled the marriage vow.

Gradually at first, then swiftly, Elspeth became excited by the prospect of having a child of her own. She was tempted to seek out Anna, whom she had not seen for many months, and confide in her sister. But Anna would be sure to tell Matt who would tell his father who, unwittingly perhaps, would steer the news back to James. Also, how could she explain to Anna that she had valid reasons for keeping the pregnancy secret from her legal husband? Anna's curiosity could draw as red and all-consuming as a furnace and she was afraid lest her sister wheedle the whole truth from her. Not to be able to talk of Michael, not to be able to talk of her child, it was small wonder that Elspeth settled into depression and hardly left her bedroom for the whole of that month.

When she awakened on the morning of the day of the snow, however, she felt well again. The wriggling bands of nausea which had tightened beneath her ribs and breasts were absent. Her revulsion at the very thought of food had been replaced by healthy appetite. She sent Kerr down to the kitchen with orders to prepare a breakfast to be served in the dining-room and with a request to her husband to join her there, but word came back that Mr Moodie had gone out early and was not expected to return before dusk.

Elspeth rose and dressed. She had never permitted a maid to clothe her and was glad of it now. Groomed and smart she went down into the dining-room and did justice to a large breakfast. When she had finished she went up to call on Mother Moodie upon whom she had not clapped eyes for almost a month.

Elspeth was not prepared for the sight that met her in the old woman's room. Mother Moodie was tied to the throne-like chair by two soft leather cross-straps and hung against them while the nurse, Betty, tried to feed her with pap from a bowl.

Though sweet herbs had been strewn upon the fire the chamber smelled acrid and awful. Elspeth had brought a novel, intending to sit by the old woman for a while, but she could not bring herself to stay for more than a few minutes. There was nothing she could do for Mother Moodie. The sight of the woman's decayed condition disturbed Elspeth, as if age might be a disease of contamination which would infect the child in her womb.

"How does she live at all?" Elspeth asked.

Betty answered, "Only God can answer such a question. His ways are verra mysterious, times."

"Does she suffer much?"

"Bit pain in the belly," Betty said. "Thinks she's carryin' a bairn, so she does."

Tolland, who had remained in the room, said sharply, "That's enough, Betty," then put a hand on Elspeth's arm. "Come away, Mistress Moodie, this is no place to linger in your condition."

"My condition, Tolland?"

"After bein' ill yourself," said the steward.

Elspeth was grateful to Tolland for giving her an excuse to leave the sick-room. It had been a mistake to come at all. Death was too near Mother Moodie and clouded Elspeth with memories of Michael. At least he had been spared this sort of indignity. Perhaps there was something to be said for dying young. She thought also of Gaddy, felt sorrow gnaw at her heart, and loneliness. She went downstairs once more but exuberance had gone out of her and she could find nothing with which to occupy herself, nothing that would lift her depression.

In the drawing-room she tried to busy herself with a piece of embroidery which had lain untouched in the frame for months but the threads seemed stiff as rope and her fingers clumsy on the needle. She gave up, wandered through the house, looked out of the back door to the garden and the moor. She returned to the library and did her best to bridge the gap between noon and tea-time by browsing through books.

It was into the afternoon when she roused herself and rang the handbell.

Kerr appeared at the door, crumbs at the side of her lips.

"Fetch me my riding-coat an' shoes, Kerr."

"Will ye be needin' the gig too?"

"No."

"Are ye not goin' to see Miss Blaven?"

"No, Kerr. I'm goin' out walking."

"I'll be comin' with you."

Elspeth resented being constantly trailed by servants. "You will stay indoors."

"The menfolk say it'll snow."

"I'm not an invalid. Besides, I intend only to walk to the head of the village."

"I'll fetch your coat."

"Do."

Kerr would tell Tolland and Tolland might try to dissuade her from going out alone. Why did servants seem like gaolers? If she had been a byre-maid or labourer's daughter they wouldn't have cared what she did with herself. Had marriage to James transformed her into an object made of porcelain or spun glass? Tolland did not put in an appearance, however, and Elspeth put on her outdoor garments in the hall and, leaving her anger behind, hurried out of Moss House and through the garden to the road.

She had no particular destination in mind but a trace of morbidity, mingled with sentimentality, drew her to the kirkyard to wander in solitude among the stones.

Elspeth was not, after all, fey enough to converse with the handsome monument that marked the place where Gaddy lay or to question the flat, sequestered tablet beneath which the identity of her natural mother was hidden.

Here Lies a Stranger
Died November
1791

In her present peculiar mood, though, Elspeth found herself close to tears. So much had changed that a span of twenty years, stretching back into a previous century, seemed an eternity. It came upon her abruptly that she was older now than her mother, the stranger, had been when she stumbled into Balnesmoor all those years ago and, protecting her infant to the bitter end, had succumbed to cold, exhaustion and neglect, to the terrible loneliness of the outcast. Gaddy had been near forty in 1791 and if her real mother had lived she would, even now, be a good eight or ten years younger than James.

The calculations gave Elspeth pause. She got down upon one knee, took off her glove and placed her hand upon the rough surface of the tablet but she could induce no feeling of rapport, or of empathy. She could not imagine face or feature, think of the girl as young. If they had to meet here and now she would be hard put to recognise the poor creature, let alone communicate with her. Rising, she walked the few yards to Gaddy's monument but felt distanced from it and did not stoop to touch it.

Turning, Elspeth looked over the blunt steeple that crowned the old kirk, up to the unleafed trees and misty white line of the hill that stepped up to Drumglass. She felt calm now. The liberating irresponsibility which Michael had brought into her life, the feeling of being at the centre of a glitter-wheel of possibility, had left her. She was moved by a different destiny, by the fact of her pregnancy. In winters to come she would no longer be alone. However James chose to punish her, she would be protected by the need to protect her child.

Snow had rolled westward from Balfron, swallowed Kennart and billowed suddenly into Balnesmoor. Elspeth fastened her scarf over her bonnet and hurried out of the kirkyard into the Bonnywell.

Slated roofs were already white and thatch, stiffened by hoar, had taken on a granular transparency. Smoke coiled on the rising wind, snaked down into the lanes and backs. From behind the congestion of cottages came the clash of a pump and the grunting of hogs. Two small lads lugged a butter-churn along a lane, splashing and slipping on the carpet of new snow and laughing at the exhilaration of the blizzard.

A timber-wagon trundled from the top of the brae where the road forked and split again into field-crossings and steading tracks. The wagon was a high, slat-sided cart that was pulled by a single horse. It bristled with deadfall. Elspeth recognised McDonald at the reins. As the cart passed she saw that the man seated on the tail-board was her brother-in-law, Matt Sinclair.

It had been several months since Elspeth had last encountered Anna's husband. She had harboured ill-feeling towards him since the time of Gaddy's death. Today, however, she was not displeased to see him. She would not call out to him, though, or wave a greeting, for she felt he, in the company of other foresters, might be embarrassed by her attention.

Matt, however, spotted her. He was off the cart in an instant. McDonald reined the wagon to a halt. Matt jogged round to the big fellow and spoke with him, gesturing over his shoulder with his thumb. McDonald nodded, grinned and clicked the horse into a walk again, leaving Matt standing on the road.

Matt looked thicker and coarser than she remembered him. He had lost his boyish handsomeness. The padded garment and bulky breeks contributed to the impression of stolidity. He demonstrated a pleasure in the chance encounter which took Elspeth by surprise. What had changed him? Was it Anna's promotion to house-servant? She had heard, through Kerr, that Matt was a friend of Pad Tomelty.

"My, but you're lookin' unco' bonnie, 'Pet."

His heartiness did not seem feigned. Had he been tippling down at the wood? If so, liquor had certainly sweetened his disposition.

"You look well yourself, Matt."

"We're deliverin' fuel to the Ramshead. I'll crack wi' you a while, if you've no objection, since it'll give me an excuse t' avoid strenuous labour."

"Will the big man not object?"

"Not him. It's the fifth load for the inns this week. God, but there's hardly a scrap o' hearth-wood left in the neighbourhood. I swear if we'd had t' length an' split the bloody stuff we'd have been at it 'til Whitsun." Matt prattled on, "He's keen t' make money, our new lairdie. He'd have had the whole plantation sold an' shorn if my father had not intervened."

"Does he heed your father's advice, then?"

"In some matters," Matt answered. "Did you hear I lost the wee monkey?"

"No," said Elspeth. "When?"

"Three weekends since."

"Did it run away?"

"Chased away, more like."

"Will it not come back again?"

"Be stiff by now." Matt shrugged. "Foxes or fummarts'll have gobbled him up."

"You'll miss it."

"I do that."

"Can you not buy another?"

"Nah, 'Pet. There'd be none as gentle as Jacko. I've done wi' animals. They're more bloody bother than they're worth."

He had been tippling. She could smell the reek of whisky on his breath. If the grieve caught a man in drink during the hours of daylight he would roast him, shouting so loud he could be heard all over the Ottershaw parks and half-way up Drumglass. Lachlan Sinclair would not spare Matt simply because Matt was his son.

"I hear Anna's workin' in the big house."

"Anna?" For an instant Matt seemed to have forgotten who Anna was. "Och, aye, she's a day-maid. Dawn 'til dusk."

"What does she do there?"

"Dances on bloody Randall just the way my father danced for auld Sir Gibbie. Anna thinks the bloody grass grows green where the lairdie plants his hin' end."

"She'll be bringin' in more money, though."

"A shillin' or two more, I suppose."

"Still, it's better for Anna than slavin' in the dairy these cold mornings," said Elspeth, who was beginning to find the conversation disconcerting.

"Aye, whenever Anna gets cold, the laird heats her up."

"Matt, what are you saying?"

Sleet-snow had turned dry now and clung to every surface, formed little white whirlwinds along the road.

Matt reached out and caught her arm.

His cheeks were matted with stubble, flushed. In his eyes was a glitter of liveliness as if he had wakened from a daze. He reminded her a little of Peter Docherty who had once worked the Dyke for her father. Peter had fallen foul of the bottle, latterly.

"I'm not goin' yet," Matt declared. "Come, lass, an' we'll shelter in the close there an' finish our chat."

Two cottages, joined by a narrow arch of timber and sod, formed a roofed lane hardly wider than a man's shoulders which led into the pens at the back. Gated, the lane sometimes gave shelter to a sow and her farrow but today it was open and empty. Beyond it the view of the hillside might have been etched in soap on a blown mirror.

"I must get home, Matt."

"Are ye frightened what Jamie might say? T' the devil, Elspeth, I'm your sister's man."

Reluctantly Elspeth let him draw her across the road into the lane.

"Did ye not know that the fine an' honourable Randall Bontine has taken my wife for his pleasure?"

"Matt, I canna believe –"

"Oh, it's no fantasy. It's dinged about the byres an' stables. Every tongue from here t' Blanefield has touched the story."

"Who – who told you?"

"Nobody told me. Nobody had the stuff t' come up an' tell me. Maybe that's as well since then I'd be expectit to make a fool o' myself by challengin' the laird to his face. Can ye see that, 'Pet? Matt Sinclair standin' up to a laird?"

"Has your father –?"

"I canna say. Perhaps he's heard an' pretends he's deaf. He's damned good at that trick."

"How long?"

"Three weeks. Four."

"I think," said Elspeth firmly, "it's naught but malicious gossip an' you should take no heed of it."

"Anna hasn't denied it."

"But has she –?"

"Informed me about it? Embellished it with interestin' details? Hardly!" said Matt. "I see so little of her these days she'd barely have leisure t' tell me anythin'."

Surprisingly, Elspeth felt sympathy for him. He was gruff and selfish but, if what he said was true, he was a victim of Anna's flightiness.

Elspeth remembered only too well the incident by the Lightwater and Randall Bontine's swaggering arrogance. She did not suppose that he had changed much. She remembered too how Anna had mooned over the soldier for months afterwards.

"Is Anna the only one?" Elspeth asked.

Matt pushed himself away from the wall, scratched his chin with his nails. "Huh! I never thought o' that. Aye, it may be that Anna's only one o' a whole stable. I'll ask Brigit."

"Brigit?"

"Brigit Tomelty. She's a new servant too, strange as it might seem."

"Will she tell you the truth, Matt?"

"What has Brigit got t' gain by fibbin'?"

"Perhaps if she's one of –"

Matt threw back his head and laughed. "Nah, nah. Bridie's no' for the laird 'less he's no better than a ram leapin' daft about the ewe-field; though she would give him a fair warmin' if he'd the wit t' realise that the strongest spirits come in the plainest bottles."

Elspeth was not shocked by Matt's analogies. She had been raised on the Nettleburn, had consorted with field-hands and cottagers all of her life. What caught Elspeth off balance was Matt's meek acceptance of Anna's infidelity. Could it be that he was proud to have his wife picked by the new laird? She doubted it, not with Sinclair pride. Perhaps he simply did not know how to cope, short of dragging Anna out of service and locking her away in the cottage in the woods. That, Elspeth thought, is what many a man in Balnesmoor or Ottershaw would do, and add a whacking with a willow switch for good measure. Under the law of Scotland a husband, whether employed by a master or not, could demand as his right the return of his wife's person; a servant was no slave, obliged to tolerate grossness and impropriety. Anna had probably encouraged the soldier-laird. There was that to it; the quarrel was not between Bontine and Matt but between Anna and her husband. Elspeth understood the confusions and implications which Matt, for all his pride, had chosen to ignore.

Matt said, "I could tak' her away. He could do nothing t' prevent it. Anna's mine an' must follow me where I choose to lead."

"She might – she might not want to leave Ottershaw."

"Damn it, Elspeth, do you think I'm not aware of that?"

"Do you wish me to speak to Anna?"

"She'd pay no heed t' you. The truth is I'm not for bein' chased out o' Ottershaw by anyone. I'm fine an' settled here. With or without Anna, I prefer to stay put."

"Why are you tellin' me these things?"

"You're her sister. You've a right t' know what's goin' on."

"Is that the only reason, Matt?"

"If there's a public scandal, it'll reflect on yourself."

Elspeth smiled sardonically. Scandal it seemed again was dogging both Gaddy's daughters.

"What of you, Matt?"

"What of me?"

"Does it not hurt you when they laugh behind your back?"

"God, 'Pet, they know better than that. Besides, I have certain consolations."

"Drink?"

Matt chose not to answer. He changed tack. "You'll have heard how Gibbie an' his bairns are on the move t' Strachan Castle come the May month," he said. "God, but I don't envy him the runnin' o' that heap o' stones. There's only a hundred acres wi' the buildin' so he'll soon dribble through his inheritance wi' nothin' much to cultivate for income."

Elspeth had heard Tolland and James discussing some such affair but she had been too depressed to take much interest. Even now she felt no quickening of curiosity.

"Randall'll have Ottershaw to himself," said Matt. "He'll ruin the place inside three years."

"Is that your father's opinion too, Matt?"

Again Matt ignored her question. "Aye, then he needn't be secretive about his sport. He can have lassies in by the bloody bushel flittin' naked about the halls."

To Elspeth's surprise nothing Matt had told her touched her very deeply.

"Aye, when he's used her an' had enough pleasure from her, when he tires of her craikin', I expect he'll discard her," Matt said. "Then she'll come whimperin' back to me to beg forgiveness."

"Matt?"

"Then we'll see what's the best road out o' Ottershaw and what the world has t' offer us. I'll be wealthy then and she'll see me for what I really am."

"Wealthy? How will –?"

Matt tapped the side of his nose with his forefinger. "So long as ploughmen an' graziers have dry throats I'll make money. Did ye suppose I was the sort who'd work for a shillin' an' doff my cap in gratitude for the privilege o' servin' some high-born rake like Randall Bontine? Not me. Not Matt Sinclair."

"Do you mean the work you do for Tomelty'll make you wealthy?"

"Rich as sin."

"Matt, be careful."

He put his hands on her shoulders and bent his head so that his face was close to hers. She could smell whisky on him most powerfully now, a clean odour in contrast to the damp, animal smell of the padded garments.

"Aye, 'Pet, it's you I should have marrit, not bloody Anna."

She felt nothing, no twinge of regret, none of the longing that had once possessed her to be the wife of Matt Sinclair. A great gulf had opened between them. She pitied him, that was all. She pitied his despair, his conceit, his naivety. How could Matt believe that Anna would ever come back to him, that a few ill-earned guineas in a purse would change Anna's attitude towards him? Elspeth knew her sister too well to suppose that she would settle for Matt Sinclair when her boldness and her good looks might give her value in the eyes of men like Randall Bontine. Matt had taken refuge in the illusion that he might win back Anna's love.

"Give's a kiss, Elspeth."

"Don't be so bloody daft, Matt," she told him.

She pushed him away but he held her.

"Would you not run away wi' Matt Sinclair if he was rich?"

"I – Matt, let me go."

He did not insist. He planted his lips on her brow, pushing back her bonnet.

"Better than the man ye've got, love."

"How dare you, Matt Sinclair! James is –"

Unable to devise a simple lie from her confusion, she pushed away from her brother-in-law and hurried out of the close into the road, into the sheeting snow, adjusting her bonnet as she went.

Laughing, Matt came after her, hands on hips.

He did not pursue her but stood idly watching as Elspeth disappeared down the road towards Moss House; then he turned on his heel, thrust his hands into his pockets and, head down, trudged away to the Ramshead to join McDonald.

Neither Matt nor Elspeth noticed the man on horseback, motionless by the elm at the head of the Kennart road. But the man had noticed them.

If chance placed James at the head of the Kennart road at precisely the wrong moment, what followed seemed no more than a logical, if tempestuous, yielding to necessity.

Elspeth barely had time to enter the house, to allow Kerr to take off her coat and bonnet, before her husband, his clothing caked with snow, came stamping up the corridor from the kitchens with a harassed Tolland trailing behind him. James shouted to her to join him immediately in the library.

Elspeth looked at Kerr who shook her head and swiftly took the garments away to dry, leaving the young woman stranded.

Tolland had gone into the library, leaving the door wide open. He emerged a second later carrying the weaver's greatcoat and hat in his arms, his cheeks scarlet. Elspeth could hear her husband shouting furiously.

"*Elspeth.*"

Her feet were sopping wet and moisture had seeped up her ribbed stockings almost to the knee. She would have preferred to go to her room and change before answering her husband's summons. Good sense and a measure of fear prompted her not to delay, however. She hurried across the hall and into the room.

Realising that a scene was in the offing and wishing to preserve a modicum of privacy, Elspeth closed the door behind her, then turned to face her husband whom she had never seen so livid with rage.

"I take it that you are no longer indisposed?"

"I'm better than I have been."

"Well enough to trot out on a filthy day like this."

"I felt the need for a breath of air and a little exercise." She would not bow to his anger.

It occurred to her that James had discovered her secret. She knew that he had been riding around remote grazings; had he heard from some sly farmer that she had visited Preaching Friar not to call upon Miss Blaven but to sleep with her nephew?

"Exercise of an immodest kind, eh?"

"I went to the kirkyard, if you must know."

"Oh, the kirkyard, is it? Is that where you keep your assignations, among the gravestones? On the grave of your mother, perhaps? God, girl, but you are so like her, in spite of all I've done for you."

Elspeth was too disturbed to take in the import of her husband's accusation.

"Perhaps I should have asked your permission, James, to walk out in Balnesmoor."

"My permission to sneak into the pig-yard with your lover," James shouted. "Do not deny it. I saw you with him."

"With – with him? Matt? Do you mean Matt?"

"Aye, damned if I don't. That whelp, Sinclair."

"My lover? Are you – have you lost your reason? Matt's my sister's husband."

"So that makes it a family concern an' relieves you of guilt, does it?"

"I met him by chance. He wished to ask after my health an' to tell me about Anna."

"Did it take him a quarter of an hour, hidden in the pig-yard?"

"We only sheltered there out of the snow."

"Do you deny that you've been meeting Sinclair in secret?"

"I deny it most emphatically."

Elspeth had so far kept her distance lest James forget himself completely and strike her down. Now she came forward, placatingly. She had always known that he was proud and jealous but had not imagined him to be completely irrational. The chance meeting with Matt would make her eventual confession almost impossible. Any hope she had nurtured that James would understand vanished.

She said quietly, "James, I don't care for Matt Sinclair. He's nothin' to me except Anna's husband. I haven't seen him for months."

James caught her by the nape of the neck. He shook her violently, so violently and unrelentingly that her ears rang and her teeth chattered and whorls of red danced and flickered in front of her eyes. For an instant she thought he might break her neck but suddenly he flung her from him with such force that she fell to the carpet. James Moodie's madness was a poison in the air. It took hold of Elspeth too. She imagined she felt forming limbs shrink softly within her and heard the anxious cry of the unborn. She clasped her forearms across her stomach and struggled to her feet.

She had no temper to speak of, not like Anna, but she was caught in James's fury and hurled words back at him at the pitch of her voice. She no longer thought of the servants, of Matt or Michael. All the pent-up frustrations and in-turned guilts of the past eighteen months burst forth in a torrent.

"What if I had?" she screamed. "What if I had deceived you? Have you not deceived me? Am I not your wife? Am I not young and – pretty? You've never loved me, no, nor wanted to love me."

"I told you before, I cannot."

"You should have told me before you proposed marriage, before you let me wed you."

"I gave you no –"

"You made me a false promise."

"No promise of – of *that*."

"Would it not be understood that in a marriage I would share your bed, that we might have children?"

"Do not say it, Elspeth."

"Is the thought so abhorrent to you?"

"I've provided you with –"

"Everything except what marriage means."

James shouted, "Do you need to be taken, like a damned ewe in the season?"

"I'd hoped I would be worth loving. If I had found a man who found me worth loving, would I be wrong to respond? God, James, but if I've learned how to deceive, I learned it from you and no other."

"So you admit Sinclair –"

"What if it *is* true?" Elspeth cried. "If Matt Sinclair has played husband with me, it's more than you've ever done."

"But I *am* your husband.'

"You are not. You find me abhorrent."

"Elspeth, I love you."

"Aye, James Moodie, you have to shout it because you never will whisper it while you hold me in your arms."

Something in that remark stung him, swung his mood into irrational fury once more.

He stepped quick and caught her arm, swung her round and caught her hair, pressing her down, shaking her with even more violence than before. Again Elspeth felt a shrinking inside her. She screamed, twisted, caught his wrist, twisting in a frenzy, and bit the pad of flesh at the base of his thumb.

James uttered a groaning sigh as if she had kissed him, giving pleasure and not pain. But he did not release her. Blood weltered her lips and still he held her. She had never lost control before, had never experienced such emotions, black and alluring. But as Elspeth dug her teeth into the weaver's flesh, she felt as if she were snapping a cord, biting it apart as midwiving shepherds did with lambs.

At length the pain became too much to bear. James shook her free. Blood poured from the wound, dripped to the carpet. He brought the hand up to his face, looked at it and then at Elspeth. For a fleeting moment she exulted in a sense of power over him. The little babe lay safe and secret still in her body. Memories of Michael were preserved like rose-petals in her heart. She was, after all, a lass from hard hill country and had the strength of a hill-child in her. James could not destroy her, short of murder.

She dabbed at her lips with her sleeve.

Motionless, James stared at the ooze of blood from the tear in his hand, his madness apparently discharged.

Then pain came into Elspeth, sweeping through her stomach and loins. Nausea rose behind her breastbone. She retched, holding on to the sofa, retched again. The sudden grip of the sickness shocked her into sweat.

James barely seemed to notice her distress or, if he did, remained indifferent to it. He rotated his bleeding fist, staring fixated at the coagulating blood. He glanced at Elspeth then returned to contemplation of his injury with a puzzled little frown.

"James. Help – me."

"What ails you?" he asked, casually.

"I'm – I'm unwell."

He tutted and, shaking his head, stalked to the door of the library.

He called out for Tolland, who came swiftly.

"My wife appears to be ill. Assist her to her bedroom and have – what's the girl's name –"

"Kerr, is it?" said Tolland.

"Aye, have Kerr attend her."

"Will I send for the physician, Mister Moodie?"

"Over-excitement, that's all it is," said James.

Without offering assistance, he watched Tolland, aided by Kerr, get Elspeth to her feet and out of the library into the hallway. From the door he watched them escort her up the staircase. He watched the bedroom door close.

It was dark in the house now, though falling snow seeped a ghastly grey light into the library. Out of the tunnel of the kitchen corridor came a maid-servant bearing a taper from which to light the candles about the place.

At the top of the stairs Tolland appeared. He picked dainty steps through semi-darkness towards the taper which the maid-servant held aloft. Tolland waved the girl away into the dining-room and advanced towards the master who, still with one hand cradled in the other, waited at the library door.

Tolland made no comment about the wound which bled obviously and profusely, blood making a soft pat-pat-pat upon the polished boards.

"The mistress is lying down, sir, but she's in great discomfort an' is weepin' sore."

"The maid's with her, is she not?"

Tolland paused. "It's a doctor she's needin', Mister Moodie."

"A doctor?"

"I have seen such events before."

James shook his head as if to clear it. The violence of the past few minutes seemed to have stunned him and robbed him of his ability to concentrate. "What 'events', Tolland?"

"I think, sir, she might be in danger of losin' the bairn."

"Bairn? What bairn?" James Moodie asked.

Tolland had turned the colour of old milk. He stammered, "I mean – I mean – I mean the fever may affect the mistress when it comes to bearin' a child."

"I didn't know you were expert in midwifery, Tolland."

"Shall I not send for Mister Carstairs?"

"In this weather an' at this hour? No, we'll wait until morning, by which time, I'm sure, my wife'll have fully recovered."

"Mister Carstairs –"

"No more of this nonsense, Tolland. My wife's upset because I had cause to reprimand her for wilfulness."

"I beg your pardon, Mister Moodie."

"Bairn, indeed!" James lifted his wounded hand and displayed it to the steward. "What you may best do is fetch me a bowl of clean water and a cloth. I'll be in my room. Also, I think, a pair of dry hose an' breeches."

"Aye, Mister Moodie."

"And where are the lights?" James shouted. "Bring me a damned light this instant."

Elspeth was conscious when Tolland slipped into her bedroom. She had never seen the steward harassed before He behaved as if she were already dead.

Finger to his lips, Tolland whispered, "He'll have none o' the doctor, Kerr. I'm thinkin' he's gone loony, at last. God, but it's like a hospice here. How is she now?"

Kerr leaned over the bed.

Elspeth lay on her back on the top of the clothes, legs drawn up a little and knees parted. She had taken off her damp outer garments but still wore petticoats, shift and bodice. It was warm in the bedroom for the fire burned brightly, casting animate shadows about the chamber and flickering reflections in the window glass.

Tolland glanced behind him as if he expected the master to storm into the room at any moment. It was not a place where a steward should be found, not with the mistress of the house in such immodest condition.

Kerr said, "Are ye feelin' better?"

"I'm cold," Elspeth whispered.

"I'll get ye under the blankets in a minute."

Tolland approached. Elspeth looked up at him.

"Did you tell my husband I need a doctor?" she asked.

"Aye, but he'd have none of it."

"Didn't you tell him I was ill?"

"Tomorrow, he said that tomorrow'd do."

Elspeth felt a little easier now, though she could not get warm and the heavy pain on the insides of her thighs remained.

Tolland held his head to one side, trying not to look at her. He said, "Did you not tell him?"

"No."

"Why ever not, Mistress Moodie?"

"I wanted t' be sure first."

"How far are you gone?"

"Three months, close to."

"A bad time, a bad time," said Tolland.

Kerr said, "For a man wi'out a wife, you seem well versed in female secrets, Mister Tolland."

"I was the first o' nine bairns. I saw my mother cast three and I can remember it clearly. I know what it is, Mistress Moodie. But if you lie very quiet an' still for a while it might knit and settle again."

Kerr snorted. "Ye missed your callin', Mister Tolland. I'd never have guessed at such knowledge."

"Guard your tongue, girl," Tolland said. "Put your hand to her brow, see if she has sweat."

Kerr placed a calloused palm on Elspeth's brow. Even the touch felt soothing.

James may have abandoned her but she had not been deserted by those of her own kind. All the anxieties which had troubled her had been swept aside as her mind fixed on the realisation that she might lose Michael's child, that nature, in recompense for sin, might rob her of the only thing that she had ever truly wanted. The need to bear was as fierce and hot in her as fire in a forge. She knew that she was being shaped and tempered by it. She must not give in, not to pain, not to James, not to anything.

Tolland and Kerr whispered by the fire. The sound seemed unrelated to the travail of the past hours.

Elspeth turned her eyes, not moving her head, and saw firelight in the uncurtained window and, drifting thick against the glass, the blue-white snow. She felt pain ebb, become duller, hardly an ache and, as she looked out at the whirl of flakes against the sky, felt her body grow warmer and heavier, her lids heavy and sleepy. The sound of the servants' voices was like a lullaby, like hearing again the crooning talk of Coll and Gaddy in the cosy corner by the hearth.

Elspeth could not converse with a cold upright stone in a kirkyard in the broad light of day but, as she slipped down into sleep that night she was child enough still to murmur, "Mammy, help me, please."

The cotton shift was pasted to Anna's limbs with sweat. It wrinkled about her thighs as she lay against the bolster in the monstrous four-poster which, Randall had told her, had been a breeding-ground for three generations of Bontines. She felt heavy and sated. She had been with Randall in the soft feather bed, its brocade curtains closed, for two hours or more. She had pleasured him with sinuous tricks which nobody had taught to her but which, as far as she was concerned, were the birthright of any full-blooded young woman.

Randall was experienced and the couplings in the late afternoon had become the pivot of his day. He had never believed that breeding was the sole purpose of love-making but neither had he believed that he might be entrapped by it, drawn into a dangerous emotional need for one woman, a drover's daughter at that.

"What's the hour?" said Anna.

Pouring wine from a bottle, Randall stood naked by the fire. Anna admired his cord-like muscles, his lean, whipped-down build. She never tired of admiring him. It was not just that he was strong, but also a thoroughbred, as fine and well-glossed as his own stallion, quick too and tireless. They played on each other, the laird and the girl, caught in a skein of physical desire from which neither could escape, nor wanted to.

"Long after dusk." Randall lifted himself precariously on tiptoe and peered through the small breast-high casement. "God, but it's snowing with fair weight now. I hope my instruction was obeyed and the Cheviots brought to cover."

"How long after dusk?"

"About six of the clock, I reckon."

Anna laughed. "Tonight Hunter'll not swallow any tale at all. I came to help Dunn brush cloaks an' overcoats in your cupboard, remember."

"Dunn will be fast asleep in the library, curled up in front of the fire."

"With the key turned in the lock?"

"For sure."

"He's jealous of me, ye know."

Randall brought a glass of wine to the bed and handed it to Anna. As she reached to pluck it from his fingers he slipped his hand beneath her breast caressingly.

"Dunn has every reason to be jealous, don't you think?"

"Och, let me have my drink in peace, Randall," Anna purred. She sipped from the glass. "What sort of stuff is this?"

"Claret."

She slid out her tongue, touched it to the surface of the wine and rubbed it upon her upper lip, wetting it, then she leaned forward and kissed him upon the chest.

"I'll have to go, Randall."

"Not until I dismiss you, Sinclair."

"My husband'll be waitin' for his supper, fumin', no doubt."

"Will he make love to you tonight?"

Anna drew back in mock horror. "What sort o' question's that for a gentleman to ask a lady?"

"Will he?"

"Perhaps."

"Will you enoy it?"

"Mister Bontine, I prefer t' be discreet, if you've no objection." She drank again. "I trust you're not invitin' me to make comparisons."

"I've nothing to fear from comparisons," said Randall. "Have I?"

Anna pushed the wineglass at him and rolled from the bed. "Enough of this, sir. I'll need to be awa'."

Randall watched as she padded to the chair where she had thrown her clothes.

"If you were forced to make a choice, which of us would you choose?" he said.

Anna said, "Neither."

"Neither?"

She sat on a rush chair and furled her stockings over her legs.

"If I was a spinster after a husband," she said, "I'd be makin' up to – let me see – to somebody of the calibre of Mister Rudge."

"Rudge? Who is he? Oh, yes, Moodie's manager. Why, in Heaven's name, someone like Rudge?"

"He would keep me in style. An' he would appreciate me."

"I appreciate you."

"But I'm just a servant t' you, an' nothin' will ever change that."

Randall sat up. He was silent for a moment, deploying a variety of answers, choosing the correct one. Behind him – he glimpsed the movement out of the corner of his eye – Anna had stopped dressing. She glanced at him expectantly.

Randall uttered a little grunt, pushed himself to his feet, walked to the fireplace and turned to face her. Hastily Anna resumed her toilet. Her shift was tucked up into her lap and displayed the full, smooth thighs, pale above brown stockings.

"No," he said. "Nothing can change that – for the present. Particularly as you already have a husband."

"Husband or not," said Anna with a sigh, "I'll still be just a servant o' the laird, at your beck an' call. When I get too old t' please you, you'll send me out to the fields an' hoist another young lassie from the dairy for your pleasure."

"Of course I will."

Randall grinned.

"Devil, so you are," said Anna.

"No, Anna, you're the devil. You have me thoroughly bewitched. There's no help for our situation, however, and I would be grateful if you would not tease me on that score. God knows, I've a careless attitude to opinion but I am a landed gentleman."

"Aye, I know it."

"Even if I did decide to throw discretion to the winds, you'd never be accepted as a lady."

"Because I'm a dirty tyke from the servants' hall, I suppose?"

"Because my position entails obligations."

"Obligations t' who?"

"Society."

"What society? There's precious little society worth the name round here. You dinna hob-nob wi' the Edmonstones or the Duke."

Indicating that the turn in the conversation irritated him, Randall went to the chair where his clothes were folded and began to dress.

Anna stepped into her skirt, hopping.

"You can always send me back t' my husband," she said.

"Do you imagine I like having to share you?"

She flaunted her hips and tossed her head. "Better a bit o' me than –"

"In Spain," said Randall, "I could have bought you."

"Made a slave of me?"

"There are no slaves in Spain. For a few *pesetas*, you could have been mine."

"What would 'society' have t' say to that?"

"I would have had a handsome, upright lady for my wife, of course, and she would have borne me children in wedlock and have behaved with extreme modesty and decorum."

"While you an' your bought woman –"

"Scotland is not, alas, Spain," put in Randall.

"Do you believe it would have been the same between us if you'd bought me?"

"I'd have paid a high price for you, Anna."

It was Anna's turn to be irritated.

"A thousand gold guineas wouldn't be enough," she said.

"You have a good conceit of yourself."

"Is there not a sayin' among soldiers that a volunteer is worth a thousand pressed men in the heat o' battle?"

"I've never heard it," said Randall. "Pressed men learn discipline. Pressed men suffer no illusions. Now I think of it, it is volunteers who most often desert in the face of the enemy."

Fully clad now, Anna came close to the laird to share the oval mirror with him, primping at her hair as she fitted it tidily under the servants' mutch. Randall was grooming his side-whiskers which, Anna noticed, had a trace of grey in them here and there. He was not old, of course, but in comparison to Matt, a man of considerable maturity. As a lover she could imagine no better.

Randall glanced at her.

"You are not intending to desert me, Anna, are you?"

She leaned and bumped her brow gently against his.

"No, because you're not the enemy," she said.

He took her in his arms and kissed her.

"I've no other woman, Anna, and need nor want none."

"I'm glad t' hear it."

"Even though I am the master of Ottershaw and possessor of an inherited title, however, I can't do as I wish."

"What do you wish?"

"I wish that I might marry you."

"Words come cheaper than slaves in Spain, I think," said Anna.

"It's true," Randall assured her. "I'd have you as you are."

"Would you?"

"I swear I would. But you already have a husband and I doubt that young Sinclair will divorce you, no matter how hard he is pressed to do so."

"Pressed even by the laird?"

"Particularly by the laird."

"Aye, that's true."

Randall had taken the subject as far as he dared. He released her, spun her round and patted her behind.

"Go back to Hunter now. I'll waken Dunn."

"But the coats haven't been brushed at all."

"The coats do not need brushing. I haven't had one of them on my back for months. Go, Anna, before your husband comes in search of you."

"He'll be still abroad wi' his drinkin' cronies, like as not."

"Pad Tomelty's messengers, I presume."

"What do you know of Pad Tomelty?"

"Only that he sells excellent whisky at a reasonable price. That my foresters are paid more by the Irishman than they are by me, which is, perhaps, fair as they appear to spend more time working for Tomelty than for the benefit of Ottershaw."

Anna laughed and shook her head.

"Aye, you're a funny one for a laird, Mister Bontine."

"No insolence, Sinclair."

"Tomorrow?"

"If it can be discreetly negotiated."

Randall Bontine kissed her once more, unlocked the bedroom door and let her out into the corridor. He noticed that the candles had been lighted and wondered which of the servants had stolen along the passageway with the taper and what that servant had heard.

To his surprise he found that he did not much care.

Damn the servants, damn her husband. He must have her at whatever the cost; he needed her now like a drug.

"Good night," she whispered from the door at the top of the stairs.

"Good night, my love," said Randall.

Matt was not at the Ramshead or Black Bull boozing with disreputable associates, nor was he skulking at home in Pine Cottage. Matt, in fact, was hunched on a stool in the kitchen of Ottershaw House where, for an hour or so, he had been lying in wait for his wife.

Field-hands, men from the yards, and relatives of resident servants were forbidden to cross the threshold of the house. But Mrs Lacy, with a wee twitch of malice, had persuaded Hunter that Lachlan Sinclair's boy was an exception to the general rule and welcomed him in to warm himself until such time as Anna had completed her duties and was dismissed. Mrs Lacy did not waste time. She put little questions to Matt, trying to discover if he knew what was going on between the laird and his good lady wife.

Matt, who had taken more liquor at the inn, felt quite at ease. He was astute enough to realise that Mrs Lacy was a prying old bitch so did not rise to her questions. He kept his head down and supped the bowl of soup that was served him and did not appear to be in the least concerned that his wife was not in evidence.

When Brigit Tomelty flitted through the kitchen from the tub-room, which was as cold as the North Pole that afternoon, Matt merely grunted to acknowledge her greeting, though he eyed the swish and strut of her hips as she went down the corridor.

If Mrs Lacy had been less bound to the big house she might have heard village gossip and have kept a closer watch on Matt when the Tomelty lass was about, might have intercepted the one direct look each gave the other and the little wink that was exchanged between them. Mrs Lacy, however, had given up on Matt by that time and had marked him down as even more dour than his father.

Hunter, on the other hand, felt obliged to offer Matt sympathetic excuses every now and again, at the risk of making matters worse.

"She's brushin' coats. It takes a fair time if it's done thoroughly," Hunter explained.

"Aye."

"There's only her an' a lad at it, do you see?"

"Aye."

And later, "Mister Gilbert's wife must have checked her, I fear."

And Mrs Lacy, "Aye, or the laird."

And later still, Hunter said, "It'll soon be time for his dinner. I'll need to find out if he wants it up or down."

One of the two young kitchen-hands who were peeling apples in a corner of the kitchen sniggered. Mrs Lacy shouted at her to keep her mouth closed and her fingers busy if she didn't want a smack with a spurtle.

Throughout all this Matt waited, warm by the hearth, with an expression of inscrutable innocence – or stupidity – upon his face.

It was almost a quarter to seven before Anna burst into the kitchen from the back stairs and, already chattering excuses, was confronted by her husband.

Matt rose, pushing himself up with hands on thighs.

Mouth agape, Anna froze.

"What – what're you doin' here?"

"I came in early, since it was snowin'."

"Oh! How – how long've you been here?"

"Long enough."

Wreathed in steam from a braised-beef pan, Mrs Lacy observed the meeting with delight. She could imagine what bruises Anna would receive when Matt got her home and, as there was no love lost between the cook and the upstart girl, Mrs Lacy hoped that he might leather her so hard she would lose her attraction for the laird, at least for a day or three.

Matt, however, was smiling.

It was a pleasant smile too, and did not, to the cook, seem insincere.

"Did you not see Sir Randall?" Mrs Lacy had only recently begun to use the title which the soldier had inherited, without apparent merit, from his father.

"He looked in. Took Dunn away with him into the other room," said Anna.

Hunter had had enough of manoeuvring and petty intrigue. He had a dinner to see to.

"Tomorrow, Sinclair," said Hunter, as the young woman wrapped herself in her shawl, "leave early from your house so you're not late."

"Aye, Mister Hunter."

"Good night to you, Sinclair."

Matt grunted and, ushering Anna before him, went out of the kitchen and through the tub-room and into the corner of the kitchen yard.

To Anna's surprise snow lay thick as fluffed fleece and was falling steadily as if it might forget to stop. The air had a muffled, anticipatory quality, a true winter's night, not nipping cold but liquid-thick in the mouth and nostrils.

With Matt's hand on her shoulder, the couple strolled home by the path that cut the angle of the back lawns and the vegetable garden and forked into the pines. There was a road to cross, which carriages used, and then the path narrowed. Matt steered her ahead of him. She felt comfortable in her weariness, stimulated by the snow, by changed shapes and altered contours, by the heaviness of pine boughs laden and sagging. Even so she had her guard ready to pull up, lies prepared, ready to fob Matt off, convince him that any stories he might have heard were just hall gossip.

But Matt said not a word, did not scowl and tut at the embered fire or the cluttered state of the cottage. He lifted the lid of the soup pot and stuck his head down to sniff the coagulated substance within and then shook the kettle to see if it needed filling and knelt by the hearth and soon had kindling crackling and split logs ready.

It was over an hour before broth bubbled and a shank of mutton knocked on the lid of the big, round, iron pan. Anna had a fresh piece of cheese for him, though, bought from Mr Hunter since that was one privilege day-servants had, to save them fretting about shopping for provisions. It was a generous wedge, enough for two at least. Anna put it out with bannocks that were not too pale with age. By now it was after nine o'clock, the fire had burned up and the room was hot.

But Matt did not peel off his jacket and his vest, did not even remove his boots. He ate in his outdoor rig, drank whisky and hot water while seated in the box chair with a splinter of wood in his mouth to loosen meat tabs from between his teeth. He looked restless as if he were one of those birds that could not roost but flew about all night long and slept only on the wing.

"Are ye not o'er warm, Matt?"

"I'm fine."

"Sit back."

He ignored her.

She would have touched him, stroked his brow, but feared a rebuff or worse.

It was three weeks since he had taken her to bed, then it had been almost by accident since he was fuddled with drink and hardly seemed to know who she was.

For some minutes Matt sat staring into the flames. The three big unstripped logs burned with a hiss, bark peeling in ornate patterns.

He got up abruptly, making Anna, still at table, start.

He paid her no heed whatsoever but kicked round the box chair and climbed upon it and took down Jacko's cage from the rafters. He stepped to the floor with the wicker cage in his hands, the little door, untied, swinging sadly on its hinges. Though his back was to her, Anna sensed that he was weeping undemonstratively. She cowered at the table, afraid that he was about to round on her. Had he found out about Jacko? Oddly, that little crime – of which she was innocent – tormented her worse than adultery with the laird.

Elbows cocked, the muscles of his wrists thickened. She heard the dry crackle of wicker as he tore the wooden sides from the box. Even beneath his heavy jacket she could see his shoulders grow massive with effort. Then the joinings made a crisp tearing sound and the cage expanded like a concertina. Matt slammed his fists into it, flattening it, roof and floor sliding up and down, then he lowered it, trod on it, crushed it until it was no shape at all.

Anna did not move.

Matt stretched and, oblivious to scorching flames, set the wreckage firmly on top of the logs.

"He won't come back," Mat declared. "Even if he does, I don't want him now."

"Och, if he came in the door, lookin' for –"

"I don't want him, d'ye hear?"

"Aye, Matt."

He swung round. His cheeks were fiery. But he did not roar at her as she expected. He spoke positively, in a manly sort of tone.

"How much did you pay the packman for him?"

He had never asked that question before.

"I'd some money from Mammy. I never stole from the keep."

"I dinna care where it came from. How much did you pay the bloody packman?"

"I –"

"Tell me, Anna."

His brow was dappled with sweat and his eyelashes moist with tears. He wiped his palm across them, then looked straight at her.

She said, "It was – Matt, I gave Jacko t' you as a gift."

"Aye, Jacko's all you ever gave me, Anna."

"Ten shillin's. I paid ten shillin's."

Matt nodded, turned and went out of the cottage.

She realised that he had not left her, that he would return, though she could hear nothing of where he went or what he was doing at the back of the cottage. She watched snowflakes fall, staring at them until it seemed that they formed an impenetrable fabric, like bridal lace.

Matt came back with a half-gallon keg under one arm which Anna had never seen before. He set it on the table, took out his grafting knife and prised off the lid. He tipped the keg like a jug and spilled coins across the table. Shillings, florins, crowns large and glittering among humble brown pennies and shy sixpences; Matt rummaged among the coins, deftly picking out ten shillings. He lowered the keg level with the table's edge and, with the crook of his elbow and flat of his hand, swept the rest back into the container. He punched the lid down with three blows of his fist. Ten shillings remained upon the table.

"Paid," he said.

Anna hesitated. "Why?"

"Because now I owe you nothin', Anna."

"In that case," she reached out, lifted the coins and closed them into her palm, "in that case, Matt, I'll take them an' give you thanks."

Matt nodded again, curtly, and with the keg under one arm swept his bonnet from the nail on the door and walked out of the cottage carrying his treasure with him into the snow.

EIGHT

Paying the Piper

Later, when it was all over, Elspeth could not make up her mind whether James had hoped that she would miscarry or if he had already entered that state of mental confusion which would manifest itself so horribly in the autumn months. For whatever reason, James did nothing for her during the eight days of the snow.

Long days they were too, though not tedious. She needed much concentration to keep herself relaxed, to check the frantic concerns which entered her thoughts and which might affect the tranquillity of the foetus within her. She had a vision of it, not as a mass of ganglion and tendons like thrown calves and lambs she had seen in byre and pasture, but as already quite human in appearance, a tiny perfect infant floating in a sac of milky fluid. She believed that it was already cognisant of her thoughts and feelings and that if it sensed ill-will or hostility through her then it would whimper and mew and drown itself, somehow, and she would expel it dead from her body.

During the course of the snow, when the villages were locked in on themselves by drifting on the turnpikes, and not even a horseman could struggle from Balnesmoor to Ottershaw, let alone to Harlwood or Balfron, she saw little of James. She knew that he was avoiding her, keeping away from her bedroom. He made one brief visit each day, carefully choosing the noon hour so that he might appear in outdoor togs and claim that he had important 'business' to attend to so could not stay long with her. He would remain for five minutes only, not even sitting down and he would not allow Kerr to leave the room, thus preventing unwelcome confidences between him and his wife.

"How do you feel today?"

"Somewhat better, James. But I'll stay in bed a while longer."

"This weather's treacherous. Bed's the best place. It would never do if you got up prematurely an' contracted a chill. Believe me, there's nothing to get up for."

"I usually like snow."

"Not in your present delicate health. Have you eaten? Did you have breakfast?"

"Cook sent up a bowl of rice an' milk, which I enjoyed."

"I'll find you a jar of honey, if I can."

"Where, James? Can you get out far in this weather?"

"Rudge is stuck at home but McAlpin forged his way up from Kennart yesterday to assure me that all's well at the mill."

"And you, can you ride there yet?"

"Dear me, no! But there's a way by foot, apparently, down the line of Ingram's wood, where the trees have kept the snow thin. I'm to go along the river-bank, for a drift of snow as tall as a plough-horse has blocked the brig on this side."

"How will you cross the river?"

"On the ice."

"James, please take care."

"Have no fear for me, Elspeth."

He would kiss her on the brow and she would sense the tension in him, read in his eye the sullen fear that their sham marriage would soon be shattered. He kept his promise, however, and brought her a tub of honeycomb next morning and on the following day a box of dried apricots. But he came only once in the day, never in the evening. It was as if dusk brought a special darkness to his heart, a darkness which Elspeth could no longer dispel. She missed him, in spite of her fear of him.

Tolland stood in for his master, showed genuine concern and sympathy, fussed over her during the eight days of doubt. Kerr too proved a loyal friend, as if, in separation from James, Elspeth had drifted back into the circle of labourers and servants, common folk to whom trouble was indigenous.

On Wednesday Elspeth awakened to the drip of thaw. She lay on her side for a while, listening, then popped her head above the blankets. The wind was strong but now it beat from the west, and had chased away the easterly's dry cold. She heard the spat of sleet upon the pane, wet and clinging, and a hiss of snow sliding in a lump from the slates. She sat up, ugging the blankets, but found that the bedroom was warm hough the fire had died.

At that moment Kerr entered.

"Kerr, is it thawin'?"

"Och, so you're awake. Aye, it's a lovely runnin' thaw, hank Providence. If the wind holds warm it'll free most roads y evenin', so Mister Tolland says."

"Open the curtains, please."

Kerr pulled back the drapes. Almost forgetting that she had aken to bed in considerable pain, Elspeth eased herself to the loor and walked across to the casement.

Cloud scudded over Drumglass and trailed mist across the noor. The Orrals looked like slabs of pudding, ribbed with ouring cream. She saw, to her delight, red deer heading pwards from the dwellings, a sign that thaw would soon xpose crop for them on the safety of the hill. On the Dyers' Dyke Macfarlane had let out ewes to stretch in a fenced addock that hung on the slope below the farm.

After Kerr put a robe about Elspeth's shoulders and slipped idskins on to her feet to keep her warm she left her by the window while she cleaned out and kindled the fire. Experimentally, Elspeth walked about the bed while Kerr, pretending not to, kept a weather-eye on her mistress.

When the maid went downstairs with the ashes-pail Tolland was waiting for her in the corridor.

"She's up and seems fine," Kerr reported.

"Even so," said Tolland, "if he doesn't fetch Carstairs today t' make certain then I'll have Luke McWilliams ride over t' Harlwood tomorrow wi' a letter for the woman."

"Is Miss Blaven back from Glasgow, have ye heard?"

"I haven't heard," said Tolland. "From what you've told me, if she's at home she'll make every effort t' come here."

"Because it might be *his* bairn?"

"None o' that, Kerr. Not a blessed word about that," Tolland said sternly. "We've neither the right nor the evidence to go leapin' to such conclusions."

"But I saw him," Kerr insisted. "He was keepit out our way but I did see him once – and he was more than a laddie, I can tell ye, Mister Tolland."

"Whatever he was, the poor chap's dead an' buried and that's the end of it," said Tolland. "Miss Blaven's the only person who might help the mistress."

"Shall I tell her upstairs?"

"Certainly not," said Tolland.

All day long the wind sloughed from the west. Sleet turned to heavy rain and the drifts shrank, washing the roadways with mud and swiftly filling the rivers. Mr Rudge managed to ride down from his house in Drymen to begin parcelling three large consignments of tartan cloth for shipment to Jamaica, via the Glasgow agents of Pirie & Ure. To Rudge's gratification McAlpin, in his enthusiasm, had already begun weighing and had checked each piece through against its pattern, for the folk in Kingston, Jamaica, were said to be very knowledgeable about strict Highland fashion.

James had been abroad early. Again he was obliged to go on horseback for the roads would certainly not accommodate a carriage, even a gig. As had become his habit, he went alone and without informing anyone where he might be found.

First he rode to Ottershaw and, without troubling the laird, looked over the Cheviot flock to see that it had survived the blizzard, which it had, admirably. Relieved that Sir Randall had not given him short weight in the matter of tending, James took a path through the woods on to a wind-scoured little ridge which led him to the flats by Wrassle's farm where, as he had anticipated, he encountered young Wattie McGowan on a shaggy, hoof-sure pony, with the Drymen postbags strapped about him.

From his greatcoat pocket James extracted a sealed letter which he had penned the previous evening and handed it to Wattie who glanced at the address to calculate the rate.

"Kilsyth, Mister Moodie. Aye, it might be a day or two afore we can get there since the snow's still dense behin' the Campsies."

"Whenever you can, Wattie." James paid over the postage charge. "There's no great urgency."

"Will ye have goods goin' out the day, Mister Moodie?"

"If the thaw continues we'll try a load for Glasgow tomorrow."

"It's bad beyond Blanefield. Eight days we lost. Daddy went out yesterday an' never got further than the tilt beyond Ottershaw."

Weaver and carrier rode together for a half-mile, following the thread of brown mud which exposed the crown of the road. They parted in spitting sleet. James swung north towards the mill which he could see, smoking like a dung-heap, around the river bend.

Sleet and then rain drove him to shelter for the rest of the day in Mr Rudge's office. He spent time upon the walks of the mill itself chatting, amicably enough, with weavers whom he thought of as companions in the craft, though they thought of him in other less charitable terms. Throughout the afternoon rain undermined the snow and washed it down into the ground where the frost sat deep and hard in the grassroots and the whole of the Lennox thrummed with the sounds of thaw and the mill-wheel thrashed in the lade like something demented.

In the dusk James went up over the bridge, which had been shovelled out to clear a route for the cloth-carts, and up the Kennart road to Balnesmoor. On arrival at Moss House he did not go upstairs to look in on Elspeth nor did he enquire of the steward as to his wife's state of health. He retired immediately to the study off the kitchen where Tolland brought him a change of clothing and a bowl of hot broth and, with no exchange at all between master and servant, left the weaver to brood until supper-time.

The following morning, as soon as James had gone out, the steward dispatched Luke McWilliams on a stout pony to Harlwood with a short, informal note to Miss Blaven of Preaching Friar.

At noon, awkwardly riding side-saddle on a hired mare, the formidable Miss Blaven arrived, mud-spattered and scowling, to call on James Simpson Moodie's wife.

Widow Trotter, who had once been a wet-nurse to Randall, was one victim of the blizzard. Sinclair made certain that she had the best of attention. He ordered the foresters to clean out the corner of her one-roomed cottage, where a pile of rubble had fallen in through the roof, and mend the beams with seasoned timber.

At noon Matt tipped a wink to McDonald and received a nod of sanction. The foresters would soon be hiding out to eat their dinners and drink a tot or two and Matt would not be missed.

Matt took himself along the road to Pad Tomelty's cottage which was tucked away like a midden behind the more respectable dwellings. The door was not only closed but barred and sackcloth curtains hung untidily over the two spyglass windows. Matt knocked boldly. After some shuffling and whispering within a youthful voice asked who was there. Matt gave his name loudly. The door was unbarred and a small, square, bellicose face peered round the jamb at him. This, Matt knew, was Colm, one of Pad's sons. The ten-year-old had the features of an adult wise already in the ways of the world.

"Whit're ye wantin'?"

"Is your father in?"

"He's verra much occupied."

"I'll not keep him long."

With manifest reluctance young Colm Tomelty allowed Matt to squeeze into the cottage.

The place did not smell of humanity, of bedding and broth, but reeked of solder and flexion which told Matt that metalwork was being done upon the premises.

Pad seemed delighted to see his protégé and had Colm fetch meat and whisky for refreshment. A stool stood before the fire and a low table at which Pad sat cross-legged like a cobbler. It wasn't a brogue or a patten which occupied the last but a sheet of thin copper.

The remaining parts of the assembly required for distillation were scattered about the room; stillhead, receiver and worm. From under the cooking-pots on the fire protruded the handle of a brazing-iron. A bowl of tiny rivets chittered on the hob. It was typical of the Irishman to waste no time but to prepare for the coming season when barley would again be plentiful and he could extend his 'dumps' back towards Aberfoyle from whence, a year or two ago, he had been routed by King's officers.

"Tell me, Pad, what it would take to learn how to make the vital waters, as you do yoursel'?" Matt said.

Colm, at ten, snorted. He had already learned that smugglers were born not made. His father silenced him with a tap from the hammer, gentle enough, on the side of his head.

"Patience," said Pad, "an' nerve."

"An' money?"

"Aye, that too."

"But it's not somethin' beyond the average man?"

"Oh, there are secrets to it." Pad put down his hammer, lifted aside the beaten panel which would soon form one third of a still. "Secrets to the makin' of whisky a man can drink wi'out re-gorgin' it on the spot."

"Would you teach me?"

Pad cocked his head. To some he would have seemed merely impish but Matt had been with Brigit often enough to recognise slyness.

Pad said, "Teach you t' abandon your prospects as a grieve an' take into the hills wi' me an' mine, is that what you ask, Matt Sinclair?"

"No," said Matt. "I'd wish t' buy an assembly from you, everythin' required t' distil a potable whisky on my own account."

"Heh, have ye such a big drouth then, lad?"

"I have a drouth for makin' money, Pad."

The smuggler shook his head. "But this's no trade for that, Matt. Do ye suppose I'm wallowin' in filthy lucre?" He waved his hand. "Does it seem so from the evidence o' your eyes?"

"Perhaps not, but you're a wheen richer than any tree-planter, an' don't pretend otherwise."

"Can ye face prison, if needs be?"

"Eh?"

"Prison, the jail at Stirlin'."

"Have you faced prison, Pad?"

"I've been shut awa' three times."

"I never knew that."

Pad shrugged as if it were not something worth bragging about. But he paused to smile and ruffle Colm's hair for the boy was beaming up at his father in admiration. To have suffered in a dungeon was, for the laddie, the true mark of manliness.

Pad said, "Did Brigit no' tell ye?"

"No, she did not."

"Tighter an' tighter the noose draws," said Pad.

Matt laughed uneasily. "Aye, Pad, but you canna convince me there's no profit t' be made in good liquor."

"It's not the makin', it's the sellin'."

"I've learned a bit about that already, have I not?"

Pad did not deny the young forester his conceit.

"I could build ye a still, all that'd be required," Pad ventured, "for a fair price since I know ye so well an' you're a close acquaintance o' my daughter."

"What sort o' price?"

"It's no' everybody who can construct such an intricate device as a whisky still," Pad went on. "It requires t' be dismantled at the double now an' then, packed neat for swift carryin' over rough country."

"How much, Pad?"

Pad leaned his elbows on the low table and squinted up at the young man. "There's only room enough for me an' mine in this part o' the world, Matt. I couldna impart wisdom an' sell a tangle o' gear t' a man who'd cut away the very foundations o' my livelihood."

"Compete wi' you?" said Matt. "I wouldn't have the gall. Nah, nah, it's away from here I'm wantin'."

"Easy t' make a mouth about it," said Pad.

"I'll take an oath on it."

Pad crept forward until the stool was canted and his shoulders had come so high that his elongated earlobes rested on them. He cupped chin in palms and contemplated the curved copper sheet before him as if it were a scree-ing glass. "What is it that ye really want, Matt?"

"Liberty t' journey where the wind blows me, an' make a decent shillin' on the way."

"Foresters can aye find work, here an' yonder."

"I'm no bloody forester," Matt declared. "Foresters have no respectability."

"Is it respectability or freedom you're after acquirin'?"

"Can I not acquire both?"

"Smugglin's hardly a respectable profession."

"I could be in one town today, another tomorrow, turnin' a guinea in each passin' spot."

"Matt, if ye heed an old man's advice, given in faith for the sake o' my daughter, you'll make your peace wi' Ottershaw an' give up this notion."

"That I'll not do, Pad."

Pad Tomelty clacked down the stool's hind leg. A girl child brought in a whisky jug, another carried a round tray with a platter of boiled fowl upon it. There was no seasoning, apart from a pick of salt, and the pieces of fowl dripped with greasy water. The strong brown taste of the whisky flavoured the bird, however, and with the platter between them forester and smuggler fell to.

Munching, Pad said, "What sort o' payment did ye have in mind, Matt, if I was to impart all the tricks o' the distiller's art?"

"An' supply the assembly?"

"Bright an' shiny," Pad promised.

He no longer looked even passing paternal. He had, after all, made one bid to dissuade young Sinclair from sticking his head in a noose. Now the price was there for him to grasp.

"What is it worth?" said Matt cautiously.

If Matt ate beef as he ate the boiled chicken, Pad Tomelty thought, it was small wonder he needed to set his aim at a rich man's income.

"Twenty pounds," Pad said.

"I dinna have as much."

"How much do you have?"

"Thirteen pounds."

Pad Tomelty ruminated on a fragment of fowl.

He swallowed and said, "It's not enough, Matt."

"What would be enough?"

"I'll sell ye the gear for fifteen," Pad said, "but it would be doin' you precious little good wi'out the knowledge."

"What's the price o' the knowledge?"

"Work for me, as you do now, for a year wi'out payment an' I'll instruct you in all the skills attendant on makin' a decent drop o' whisky."

The bargain was wholly fallacious. There was little enough to be learned about the process of distillation. Any Highland crofter could have shown Matt the ropes in three or four hours, given him the recipe; would have too, for a guinea in the fist.

But Pad Tomelty had no more scruples than his daughter. He was as well with the daft boy's money as anyone else, particularly since it was his efforts and energy that had generated the cash in the first place. In addition – Pad salved the slight itch of conscience with the thought – by binding the grieve's son for a further year he might prevent Sinclair doing something rash and irreversible. What Sinclair needed, Pad reckoned, was a pastime to take his mind off his wife's infidelities with the new laird of Ottershaw. Fifteen pounds was not an unfair price to ask for such a service.

"Will you make me a still at the end o' the time?" said Matt.

"I'll make ye the finest still there ever was, Matt," Pad Tomelty said with such sincerity that Matt felt as if he had been promised a kingdom.

He had seen with his own eyes how folk of all persuasions clamoured for illicit tipple, how Pad Tomelty throve in the providing of it. Matt felt as if his troubles were nearly over, the burden of woes which marriage to Anna Cochran had dumped upon his back would soon be lifted away, leaving him fleet and free as a stag on the high hills.

"I'll bring twelve pounds tonight," Matt said.

"Tonight?" said Pad.

"I want t' get started at once."

"Then here's my hand on it, young Matt."

"An' mine, Pad, an' mine."

As soon as Kerr was dismissed from the bedroom and the women were alone, Miss Blaven got up from the chair by the fireside and stalked to the side of the bed where Elspeth, dressed in a day-jacket and propped up by pillows, lay.

"You *are* pregnant, are you not?" Janet Blaven demanded.

"I am."

"What induced your house steward to send for me with such urgency?"

"Nothing," said Elspeth.

She had been astonished to see the woman from Preaching Friar, and not at all pleased. It had not taken her long, however, to deduce the truth. She could not blame Tolland and Kerr for conspiring in such a manner or question their good intentions. She too had thought, seven or eight days since, of sending for Miss Blaven who had the sort of knowledge of the body and its malfunctions that could only be found in the Killearn midwife, a person with whom Elspeth wanted no truck.

"Do you still have it?" The woman leaned over her, peering with steely spinster's eyes into her face.

"I don't understand what you mean?"

"I mean, girl, did you shed the foetus?"

"Miscarry?"

"Call it what you will; has it gone?"

"No."

"Are you certain of that?"

"Of course I'm certain. I'm not entirely ignorant in these matters, Miss Blaven."

"Has there been no doctor to see you?"

"I did not deem it necessary."

"It was hardly for you to choose, girl. Perhaps it is as well that Carstairs wasn't summoned since he would only have bled and dosed you with nitre. You've more chance of carrying your term without that young idiot's ministrations."

Carefully Elspeth said, "If my husband wishes Doctor Carstairs to attend me, of course I'll agree."

Janet Blaven scooped up her skirts and plumped herself down on the bed, so close that the clothes were tugged tight across Elspeth's body.

Miss Blaven spoke with whispered urgency. "It's Michael's child, is it not?"

"The child is my husband's, not Michael's."

The lie was more believable than the truth; it would prove so with everyone. Nobody would ever suppose that the marriage had been loveless.

Miss Blaven would not give up.

"When is the birth due?"

"In October," Elspeth lied.

The woman's lips moved soundlessly as she calculated.

Defiantly Elspeth kept silent.

"Are you sure?" said Miss Blaven.

"I can calculate from the night of conception."

"Hah!" The woman expelled breath as if she had been struck a blow to the diaphragm. "I thought – I'd hoped –"

Miss Blaven, Elspeth realised, would have destroyed her without a qualm to have saved Michael. She would destroy her mercilessly to claim the Blaven baby if the lie, like the pregnancy, survived its full term.

In that quarter-hour Elspeth saw how alike Janet Blaven and James Moodie were in several respects, how each used love for selfish ends. How well suited they would have been.

"Whatever you had hoped, Miss Blaven, I regret that the child I'm carryin' cannot possibly have been fathered by Michael."

"You regret –"

"Aye, I would have had part of him with me for ever."

"Instead you bear your husband a child."

"How can I help it?" said Elspeth. "I'm his wife. And Michael is dead. You've no claim on me, Miss Blaven, unless it's to reveal what occurred between Michael and me. I see no point in that unless malice for its own sake gives you pleasure."

"You were never a girl I would have chosen."

"You didn't choose me. Michael chose me."

"If there had been more time –"

"Speculation's useless, Miss Blaven."

"My, but you have a hard heart."

"No harder than your own."

"How dare you say that."

"To let me fall in love with him, be loved by him, knowin' that he would soon die."

"Is that what you think of me?"

"I think you did it for Michael, without a care for anyone's feelings."

"Time was so – so short."

"It may not seem so short for you now, Miss Blaven."

"I had you judged from the first. You did not love him. He was nothing to you but a diversion."

"Think what you like," said Elspeth. "I'm married to Mister Moodie and will quite soon be mother to his daughter or son."

Lips pursed, cheeks flushed, Miss Blaven pushed herself from the bedside.

"I could have helped you," she said.

"But only if Michael –"

"Let Carstairs earn his twenty guineas," said the spinster grimly. "I trust that we never have occasion to meet again."

"My maid will show you to your carriage, Miss Blaven," said Elspeth with rigid formality. "I give you thanks for callin' to enquire about my health."

Stiff-backed, Janet Blaven turned and quit the bedroom, leaving behind her, about the bedclothes, the dry aromatic odour of rue.

Elspeth was aware that the outcome might be disastrous but she had been steeled by the encounter with Miss Blaven and could delay no longer in breaking the news to her husband.

She kept herself calm, anticipated the worst, repeated under her breath a resolution not to reveal to him the father's identity, come what may. The news would not be wholly unexpected. Kerr had informed her of Tolland's 'indiscretion' in hinting that the mistress might be pregnant. James, whatever his faults, was no fool.

James returned home at half-past five o'clock. He would have repaired immediately to his study if Elspeth had not waylaid him in the hall. He was surprised to find her up and about, dressed in her finery, and followed her into the drawing-room.

He glanced at the wine, the plates of cake which, at Elspeth's request, Tolland had set out. "What's this? Are we expecting guests?"

"In a manner of speakin', James," said Elspeth.

"Explain yourself."

Agitatedly James prowled about, back and forth in front of the fireplace, the chair and sofa, his head turned in her direction but his eyes not meeting hers.

"I'm carryin' a child, James."

"Yes," he said, not loudly. "Yes, I had a notion that might be the case."

Elspeth kept very calm. "It's not, as we both know, your child. It'll be born in August, late in the month."

"So you can mark the date, can you?"

Elspeth was not deterred. "I think we must discuss the matter an' what you wish to do about it."

"I see, I see," James said silkily. "The father o' the bastard wishes me to take the blame."

"Blame?" said Elspeth. "It's not the word I'd choose. But, aye, since you've raised it, you must take the 'blame'."

"Have you 'discussed the matter' with your lover? What does he have t' say to it?"

"He has nothin' to say to it."

"Is he dumb? Is he a mute? Have you taken a mute t' your bed?"

"He has nothin' to say to it because he has not been told," said Elspeth. "In fact, he'll never know that the bairn is his."

"Who else have you told?"

"The servants have guessed." Elspeth hesitated. "Miss

Blaven called on me today, an' I think she guessed too, though I did not discuss it with her."

"Who else?"

"Nobody."

James put his arms behind his back, clasped his forearms with his fists and drew his shoulders forward. She had never seen him do this before for he was usually a settled man who would sit like a stone through any crisis.

Elspeth went on, "It wasn't my intention, ever, to deceive you, James. But then you deceived me. I expected true marriage. I wanted a child of my own."

"A bastard child!"

"I know that the baby's not of your blood, James, but in the eyes of the law and the kirk it need not be born a bastard. I'm your wedded wife and I'll say nothing."

"Aye, *you* might say nothing but what about *him*? He'll be clashin' tankards with his cronies, braggin' how he put horns on Jamie Moodie."

"No, he'll not. I promise. He canna."

"Can't you hear how they'll cackle, how they'll shout how the weaver couldn't spawn a bairn of his own on his spunky young wife?"

"James, nobody in Balnesmoor or elsewhere will hear such a thing. The man's gone."

"The devil he is!"

"Stop pacin' about," said Elspeth sharply. "Listen to me, please."

"I hear you, Elspeth. I hear your lies."

Nevertheless James ceased his frantic promenade and threw himself down upon the sofa, legs jutting out, fingers to his lips as if to check an uncontrolled tirade of recrimination.

Six months ago, before the Cunninghams crawled into Kennart to torment him, he would have been delighted at the prospect of becoming a grandfather. He would have feigned indignation but, in due course, he would have forgiven Elspeth, would have reared the child as his own. But the Cunninghams were coiled like vipers and would not allow him to rest with the lie, the standmark of incest which nurtured not love but corruption.

"If you wish me to leave you, then I'll do so," said Elspeth.

"An' go to join your lover, I suppose?"

"I canna."

"Because he's married," said James.

"Because he – because he's –"

"You'll take me for half my fortune in a separation, you an' him between you."

"I'd expect only enough to keep me alive until my baby's delivered an' I got strong enough to work."

"Work? You? In the fields, I suppose?"

James slid his hand from mouth to brow, covering his eyes.

How could he cast out Elspeth as he had cast out Bell? But it was not a matter of forgiveness. In marrying Elspeth he had professed his sin to the world, though his desire for her was that of father for daughter and nothing other. He felt as if he were perched on the edge of an abyss.

The lover, Sinclair, must know that the marriage had never been consummated. James hated Matt Sinclair, hated and despised the man who had seduced his daughter. Sinclair was a loutish, arrogant wastrel and would never better himself in life.

"James, are you ill?"

Elspeth's concern was genuine.

James groaned aloud without being aware of it.

She had risen and would have come to him but he had rendered her so afraid of intimacy that she did not dare.

Dry, rope-creak sounds came from James Moodie's throat. "I – I – I –"

He could not say outright that he loved her. It would have been better if Elspeth had died all those years ago, had slipped away into eternity under her mother's breast in the rank hut by the Nettleburn. He had tried to be rid of her, God knows he had tried. He had tried to be rid of her later too, but now he had his chance. He could, as she suggested, separate from her, send her packing, not to starve like Bell, but handsomely endowed with an allowance which would provide all the creature comforts that she and her child might need. The gossips of Balnesmoor, Kennart, Harlwood might leap to any damned conclusion which suited them. Ironically, they would tattle out the truth, that he was not the father of her bairn at all.

Tempted, James stared unblinking at his daughter.

He could not, could not do it, could not send her away.

"I – I – I –"

Pain gripped his head like the pincers of a vice, fierce physical pain. Tears welled into his eyes.

"James! Oh, James!"

Elspeth was on her knees before him. His daughter wept for his suffering. He reached out his arm and drew her against him, cuddling her to him.

"Dearest, dearest, I dinna mind about the bairn," James moaned. "It's not that, not you."

"I didn't mean t' hurt you."

"I know, I know."

Elspeth waited for him to ask the question which she could not answer, but he did not ask who the father was, not then, not later, not ever.

It did not dawn on Elspeth that James had not asked because he believed he already knew and that, already, he was planning how to be rid of the man.

Alicia was the only person on Ottershaw who did not know of her brother-in-law's scandalous involvement with a servant-girl. Gilbert could have told her, broadly, what was in the wind and the nursery-maid, Peggie, or any of the other poor wights who were obliged to attend the former lady of the house, might have deluged her with intimate details of the affair. But Alicia was not the sort who encouraged confidences. As a result she heard nothing of Randall's liaison with Anna Sinclair until it had advanced to boiling-point and had distilled into a queer kind of love.

Alicia had a castle to occupy her attentions and, by hook or by crook, she was already set on transforming the tumbledown old place into something not just habitable but positively grand. So single-minded had she become that she could not be bothered with trivialities like ensuring income. She did not blench when Gilbert tried to explain that, with a scant hundred acres and no rent roll, he would have to find another means of making money and that Strachan Castle would never be another Ottershaw.

"Have you spoken with Sinclair?" Alicia demanded.

"He'll not leave here."

"Offer him a higher wage."

"I've done so. He won't budge. I can hardly insist, Alicia.

There's no land to speak of at Strachan for Sinclair to man-ge.”

“We must buy more land.”

“There's no land to be had in the vicinity of the castle. In ny case, Alicia, the last ten years have seen such a whaling ise in acre price that we could hardly afford to buy a kitchen arden, let alone grazings.”

“Find something else then.”

“But what?”

“I leave it to you. You are, after all, the head of the amily.”

“Alicia?”

“Gilbert, I have work to do, satin linings to measure for the eamstress.”

Gibbie slunk away.

In due course he turned to his brother for advice and ssistance in regard to a certain proposition which had opened o him and which might solve most of his problems, long and hort.

Thank God Randall was not locked in his bedroom on that leasant, sun-blink afternoon. Gilbert found the girl, Sinclair, n the library and she informed him that laird and grieve had one out to the scrub acres by Fumarts Wood. Gilbert thanked he girl politely. It would hardly do to offend one who shared is brother's bed, even if she was a servant.

Gibbie found his brother and Lachlan Sinclair in the rough tretch of ground that flanked the wood. Sinclair's mare was ied to a sapling but Randall had no horse or pony with him. He preferred to walk his property, to strengthen his leg. Sinclair ad a thick tablet of paper in the crook of his elbow and was usily jotting down measurements and neat drawings upon it n pencil, with Randall pointing with his stick as if he were lanning an attack upon Kennart which lay across the bend f the river about a half-mile distant.

Soon after joining them Gilbert indicated that he wished to speak with his brother on a private matter and Sinclair, his neasuring work being done for the present, mounted and rode ff on other business, leaving the Bontines alone.

Gilbert noticed that his brother was exceedingly pale and ad shed some weight. It was, perhaps, not surprising as he ad spent most of the winter indoors. Though he was more gaunt and vulpine than ever, he had lost, Gibbie thought, much of the nervous rapaciousness which had marked him upon his return from Spain.

Wasting no time Gilbert embarked at once upon the topic that had brought him out of doors.

He said, "I've been offered an opportunity to buy into a partnership which owns and operates the Farmers' Banking Company, and, Randall, I would value your opinion as to the advisability of accepting."

"What do I know of banking, Gibbie?"

"Probably less than I do."

Randall laughed. "There's no estate with Strachan Castle?"

"None to speak of," Gilbert answered.

"Therefore you require a source of income."

"In a word – yes."

"Who put your name forward for this singular opportunity?"

"Summerhays."

Randall murmured his surprise. "Well, that's something to be said in favour. Father, as you'll recall, had naught but admiration for old Nigel Summerhays."

"It's his share of the partnership that he wishes to sell."

"What do his sons have to say to that?" Randall asked.

"He has but one son, appropriately named Cotton."

Randall laughed again. He seemed, Gilbert thought, in an uncommonly good mood today. Sport with the servant-girl had certainly done his temper no harm.

"Cotton Summerhays is a director of the British Linen Bank. In fact, he has a great house in Tweeddale Court adjacent to the bank's property in Edinburgh."

"So," said Randall, "old Nigel doesn't wish to see his provincial bank gobbled up by the Linen?"

"Something of the sort," said Gilbert. "He has offered me, out of the blue, the whole of his share in the partnership."

"At what sort of price?"

"Seven thousand pounds."

"By coincidence," said Randall, "the exact sum that you have inherited from Father. I wonder how old Nigel got a nose of that."

"It's hardly a deathly secret," said Gilbert.

"Have you discussed this venture with Alicia?"

"No, not in detail."

"Why ever not, Gibbie? Is your wife not a wizard in finance as well as in law?"

"Alicia's preoccupied with preparing Strachan Castle for occupancy in May."

"Gibbie, let me ask you: are you more of a banker, d' you suppose, than you are a squire?"

"I think," said Gilbert without umbrage, "that it might suit my talents rather better."

"Can you make two and two come to five?"

"If I add a percentage of profit to the sum, aye."

"I gather that you have more than half a mind to stump up this back-breaking seven thousand pounds."

"It's appealing, certainly," said Gilbert. "But I'm not quite such a fool as you've always believed me to be, Randall. Unlike Alicia, I do not believe that you'll squander the living here on Ottershaw. I do not believe that I'll ever return here as laird. It is therefore essential that I shape a life elsewhere and Strachan Castle will do well enough."

"Why did you saddle yourself with such a wife, Gibbie?"

"Alicia's not without her virtues," said Gilbert.

"We are different laddies, Gib, which is as well. But you're right in your judgement that I'll not be losing Ottershaw on he turn of a card in a drunken spree in Edinburgh. Ottershaw s my burden, Gibbie, my fate. I've accepted that fact. But to return to the Falkirk Farmers' Bank; do you have seven thousand pounds?"

"I can raise it, even after my expenditure on the lease of the Castle and some imperative work of repair."

"But?"

"Will you write to Hildebrand and ask him to find out all hat he can about the assets of the Farmers' Bank, and its oundation?"

"Hildebrand? Why, of course," said Randall. "Yon Dumbarton rogue will be able to tell you to a farthing what the partnership's worth."

"Will you do it?"

"With pleasure, Gibbie. It's very sensible."

"Within the month?"

"Immediately."

"I already know what the bank's main sources are – cattle and sheep. It lays out notes against grazing herds and finances certain recognised drovers."

"Is it in wool-dealing too?"

"I'm sure it will be."

"In that case why not consult Moodie? No man knows the state of the wool markets better than our wee weaver mannie."

"I've another plan for Moodie," said Gilbert.

"Plan? What's this?"

"I shall be after his banking business if I take the partnership. Indeed, Randall, I shall be after business from Ottershaw too."

"Not worth having, old chatter-box," said Randall. "Truly, I'm on my uppers since I met all the legacies. Remember, if you will, that Mother had her third, apart from your own payment. I will be a borrower for twenty years, living on hard credit. I'm sure the Farmers' Bank will not want that sort of business."

"It might," said Gilbert, trying to seem sly.

"Moodie, however, is a hare worth the chase," said Randall. "I agree that capturing his banking business would be beneficial, a feather in a new partner's cap."

"If," said Gilbert, "I decide to become a partner at all."

"Hildebrand will steer you." Randall put his arm into his brother's and, still arm-in-arm, began to walk towards the house again. "But if I were you I would go after the business of another local gentleman, somebody who may be richer than any of us."

"Who might that be?"

"Pad Tomelty, of course," said Randall.

And the Bontine brothers laughed.

In the course of the next six weeks, while winter gusted into spring, it became generally known that Weaver Moodie had gotten his wife with child. It was predicted that having found the way, as it were, Moodie would soon see his lawns littered with squalling bairns and that Gaddy Patterson's eldest would rapidly lose her good looks and slender figure and become just as drab and dumpy as any cottar wife.

In accordance with the truce she had compacted with her husband, Elspeth appeared on James's arm at the kirks in Harlwood and in Balnesmoor, though she was on each occasion so swaddled up against snell spring winds that, as one wag put it, "She might be carryin' quadrupeds for all ye can see."

Distrust and suspicion were present in her relationship with James but at least she did not have to hide her pleasure in the pregnancy or her delighted anticipation of motherhood. Doctor Carstairs examined her and pronounced her well, the miscarriage a threat that had not increased, though care would be required to ensure that she carried to term.

It was the end of March, only weeks before the district went mad with lambing, before Anna called upon her sister. Since Anna did not even pretend to be a kirk person, in spite of her father-in-law's grousing about Godlessness, she had not seen Elspeth for many months, a lapse which neither sister felt keenly. The combative friendship of girlhood had evaporated, rivalry put to rest, at least to Anna's way of thinking.

'Pet might be married to a wealthy wool manufacturer but Moodie was just a common tyke compared to a laird, to a Bontine who could trace his ancestry back three hundred years. And she was the laird's true love and his lover and, if fate was at all kind, might eventually bear the next Bontine in line. If Anna envied Elspeth anything now it was the babe in her belly not the fine clothes on her back or wedlock to a dour and scowling weaver like James Simpson Moodie.

Anna had taken the precaution of announcing her intention to call at Moss House in the form of a letter. Elspeth was waiting for her and Tolland warned that Anna Sinclair was not to be kept on the step. James had made himself scarce. His absence did not bother Anna in the slightest. Nothing offended Anna these days. She soared higher than a hawk in her happiness for she knew, with that innate assurance which is the birthright of beautiful women, that she had secured Randall's heart and meant more to him, in spite of the scandals and deceptions, than passing amusement. She whitened the circumstances, felt lofty and grand, found that she could thole Matt quite well since he no longer bullied her and spent more time out of Pine Cottage than in it. She did not care a jot who Matt was with or what road he chose to take to perdition. She would be free of him soon, she felt certain.

There was less awkwardness between the sisters than there had been for years. They met like amiable acquaintances, relaxed enough but with a mature restraint upon them.

"Does it hurt?" was one of the more personal questions that Anna asked.

"It did at first," said Elspeth. "But it's only a wee bit uncomfortable now."

"It hardly shows in that frock."

"It's not due until August; there's time."

"If you're fortunate it'll be small."

"It doesn't feel small."

"What'll you call it?" said Anna.

"If it's a boy, it'll be James, I expect."

"What if it's a girl?"

It was something to which Elspeth had given no thought at all. She waved her hand. "After Mother Moodie, like as not."

"Mary Jean." Anna wrinkled her nose. "What a cheekful t' chew. Could y' not call it after Mam?"

"It'll be for James to decide."

"Call it after me, if ye like."

"I think it'll be Mary Jean."

"Please yourself," said Anna, thinking that one day Elspeth might be flattered to be related to a laird's wife, to be aunt to Bontines. The sheer impossibility of such a pass did not deter Anna from nurturing the dream.

Elspeth said, "Is Matt in good health?"

"Matt? Och, aye, he's never ill."

"I met him, as he'll have told you, on the day of the snow."

"Aye," said Anna glibly, "he did mention it."

Elspeth seemed to be waiting, with an alertness that disconcerted Anna. Matt had made no mention of a meeting with her sister and Anna did not feel constrained to pour out her heart to Elspeth.

"Is he still runnin' spirits for Pad Tomelty?" Elspeth asked.

"He just delivers an occasional keg. They all do, the foresters. McDonald's a bigger rogue than our Matt by a long chalk."

"Oh, I thought Matt was well set with Tomelty."

"Where did ye hear the like o' that?"

"I've heard other things too, Anna."

"Concernin' Matt?"

"Concernin' yourself."

"Is there nowhere in this damned country free from tattle?" said Anna, with a sigh of resignation.

"I heard how you'd become a – a favourite of Randall Bontine."

Anna laughed, brittle as an icicle. "I like that word 'favourte'. Are ye too mealie-mouthed t' come out with it, 'Pet?"

"Are you sharin' the laird's bed?"

"What if I am?"

"Good!" said Elspeth emphatically.

Anna was surprised. She had expected priggish outrage and a sermon on morality from her sister.

Elspeth said, "So it's the truth, is it?"

"I never said that. I only said I can do as I like."

"You've more courage than I'd have," said Elspeth.

"Meanin' what?"

"It's not as if you were single."

"Matt's too scared o' his place on Ottershaw to defy the aird. Randall Bontine's a match for anyone."

"Does the grieve know?"

"Old Lachlan? He was offered a post wi' Gibbie at Strachan Castle, though there's no estate there, so I hear. But he wouldn't leave his precious Ottershaw or abandon the true aird o' the manor. If I danced like Salome in the middle o' the sheep fank wi' Randall playin' the pipes, old Lachlan would look the other way. He's a bigger hypocrite – aye, an' a bigger slave – than anybody in these parts."

"Be careful, Anna, that you don't become the slave."

"Slave t' Randall Bontine would suit me fine."

"Is he – is he all you'd hoped for, Anna?"

Anna tilted her chin in an expression of arrogant defiance. "More. Much more. He loves me."

"So the other things don't matter?"

"What other things?"

"The satin gowns an' kidskin slippers; a carriage of your own with two chestnut horses an' a footman; all the things you an' I used to moon about when we were young."

"Aye, an' daft," said Anna.

"It's brave o' you to give up all for love."

"Give up?"

"Chance losin' your husband an' home."

"I'm not done dreamin' yet, Elspeth," said Anna, startled by her sister's interpretation of her affair with the laird of Ottershaw.

"Randall Bontine can never marry you, Anna."

"Since I'm marrit to Matt, do ye mean?"

"Even if you were free of Matt Sinclair, a laird canna marry a servant lass."

"Randall can do what he likes."

"A hundred years ago it might have been true, but no longer, Anna."

"God, how I hate it when you pretend t' be sensible."

"It's the truth, though."

"If I was free of Matt Sinclair –" Anna began.

"Convention would kill it."

"Randall cares nothin' for convention."

Anna was flustered and annoyed. What if she had no husband? What then? What if Matt no longer existed? That would be the true test; then she would be unprotected, without base. She would be forced to trust Randall or become an outcast, despised and reviled on Ottershaw and Balnesmoor.

Once more Elspeth had effortlessly, unwittingly, brought Anna to earth with a bump.

Anna allowed not a trace of confusion to show. She refused to give Elspeth that satisfaction. Some things did not change with the coming of maturity. The resentment between the sisters would never diminish but would rear up between them for evermore.

Anna got to her feet.

"Well, I've blethered long enough, 'Pet," she said without obvious hostility. "I must be gettin' back now. In spite o' everythin' Matt will expect t' be fed."

"It was kind o' you to call."

"May it go well wi' you an' the baby."

"An' may it go well with you, Anna," Elspeth said. "Take care."

Several years would pass before Gaddy Patterson's daughters met again, enmeshed in a tragedy that neither of them could have forseen for, come the autumn, Anna, like her sister would be with child.

In April the first seed barley was put to the ground in fields along the Strath. Since Scotch barley was the fountainhead o whisky the hearts of those folk who were fond of the vita waters gave a bit leap at the sight of the sowers. In due cours

Padric Tomelty would have his share of the crop to germinate on the floors of Eardmore and soon thereafter bottles of smoke-brown whisky would come clanking down from the moor.

Not the only producer of illicit spirits in the Lennox, there being a few dribble stills on outlying farms, Pad still had a monopoly on patch barley which government taxation had lowered in value and which could be turned to silver only by sale to a distiller. Fourpenceworth of malted barley would yield four shillings' worth of whisky in experienced hands. For that reason, and to keep his regular clients supplied, Pad risked storing grain as well as jugs during the winter months. But many sacks were wasted with mites and mould and not even Padric could mate supply to demand throughout the spring season. Prices shot upwards. Those who could pay got it all, the sore-afflicted being left to lick dry lips or make do with beer which, to a hardened whisky drinker, was like being put back on cows' milk.

The three four-gallon kegs that Matt Sinclair was assigned to deliver to the Cunninghams had, therefore, considerable value for all parties to the sale, not to mention slaves of loom and spindle whose tongues were hanging out for a dram, some of whom had reached a state of 'partiality' for liquor that a bottle a day could hardly satisfy.

The Cunninghams had acquired 'paper protection' against inspection by King's Officers, as riding officers of the revenue were locally known. A thorough search of the hillside behind the shop would have unearthed several anchors of whisky upon which duty had not been paid but waving licences and invoking the dreaded name of Moodie was quite sufficient to deter Johnston, the gauger from Drymen, from coming too close to Kennart.

Matt did not feel threatened by gaugers or the horsemen of the revenue. Left to his own devices he would have banged the kegs on to the cart and lugged them quite openly down through the Bonnywell and on to the Kennart Road. Pad, however, insisted on caution and Matt, though he had scoffed at the Irishman at the time, was soon to be damned grateful to him for concealing the containers beneath a load of pine logs.

The King's Officers sprang on him without warning. They came thundering out of a hollow a half-mile uphill from

Kennart bridge. Two were enough to cause the dray horse in the cart's shafts to shoulder left into the hedge and to turn Matt's blood to ice.

Cutlasses were drawn and raised.

Matt was addressed in a yelping English voice. "You there, where do you go? What do you carry?"

The officers seemed hardly older than he was but dashing broadcloth coats, three-cornered hats and alien accents brought Matt leaping to his feet on the cart board. It was all he could do to stop himself from jumping down and sprinting away across the field, abandoning not only the expensive cargo but the laird's horse and rig to confiscation by the agents of the Crown.

The officers rode with agility, jigged their mounts as if horses and men shared one brain. The head of the Ottershaw dray was held fast by one officer while the other tripped about the conveyance, a cutlass naked in his fist as if at any moment he might decide to strike Matt's head from his shoulders and let it bounce downhill into the Lightwater.

"Come now, you, what do you tote?"

"T timber, as ye can see." Matt was too frightened to be impudent.

"Stealing it, are you?"

"Ste Nah, I've t' deliver t' Kennart."

"Kennart?"

"T' the mill."

Matt did not know whether to keep his eye on the officer in front or to swing round to see what the devil behind him was about. The casks were covered by narrow logs of unbarked pine, boxed in by them; Pad had made sure that they could not be seen without shifting the timber.

"Are they weaving with wood now, these Highland savages?"

"It's for repairin' buildin's," Matt explained.

He felt vastly relieved when the rearward officer appeared by his side and transferred his inspection from cart to driver.

One officer spoke to the other. "What's your opinion, Cecil, shall we have him down and stripped?"

"Have him unload the cart," Cecil sniggered. "He's thick enough to benefit from the exercise, I would say."

"Step down, boy."

Matt climbed down by the wheel on to the road. Sleek horses owered over him, penned him in. Bending from their saddles he officers peered at him as if he were a piece of ordure.

"Take off the load."

"I – I –"

"Empty the cart to the boards, boy."

The blade of a cutlass was laid on his shoulder.

Matt flinched as the pressure of the cutting edge against his eck guided him towards the rear of the cart. He saw that the imber had shifted when the cart had tilted off the crown of he road. Removal of just three or four logs would expose the anded casks. Matt's mind clamoured for excuses. He would ave blurted out names, delivered Padric Tomelty, Brigit, the unninghams, big McDonald, all and sundry, to the Crown fficers there on the Kennart road if at that moment a familiar oice had not shouted an interruption.

"What's goin' on there?"

From the hollow by the river-bank Lachlan Sinclair merged. His coat skirts, breeks and boots were saturated with ater and the mare, wet to the belly-band, snorted with the ffort of the gallop into which she had been whipped.

"Why are you impedin' this man?"

The officers were startled, their arrogance punctured somehat by the authority of the stranger on the mare.

Matt gave not the slightest hint that the man was his father. He was not out of danger yet; even the grieve of Ottershaw could not stand in the way of King's Officers if they had set heir minds on trouble.

"What's this fellow to you?"

"He's a forester employed on the estates of Ottershaw and as been despatched along this road in the service of Sir Randall Bontine."

"You, who are you?"

"I am Sinclair, Sir Randall Bontine's grieve."

"Only a grieve!" the younger officer exclaimed. "You beave like a Lord Sheriff."

He sniggered but Lachlan urged the mare forward, slid t against the horse's crupper and, reaching, caught the young officer by the sleeve. He drew him round with such orce that a less expert rider would have been pulled from the saddle.

"I'll stand no insolence, not even from a King's man," said Lachlan.

"Hold, sir," said the senior officer. "Do not be so quick to take offence."

The young officer wrenched his arm from the grieve's grasp. He skittered his mount five or ten yards downhill, to obtain a favourable stance in case he had to shoot his pistol or make a charge against the man who, after all, might be no grieve but just another smuggler.

Matt sidled against the cart wheel, pressed his back to it as if his body might further shield the casks beneath the logs. His mouth was dry, his eyes fixed on his father who had brought the mare close to the senior officer and managed a smile of sorts, a kind of Bontine sneer.

"I do believe you're searchin' for whisky," he said.

"Indeed, that's so. There are smugglers in the district."

"There's whisky here," said the grieve, "but it's paid for to the Crown and the suppliers have licences for its sale."

Matt was astonished at the range of his father's knowledge. He could better have understood it if his father had been a toss-pot but Lachlan had always been opposed to strong drink.

The officer said, "The shopkeepers in Kennart, do you mean, sir?"

"I do mean, sir."

"What proof have I that you are, indeed, this grieve fellow?"

Lachlan stopped smiling. "Suspicion is, I suppose, a requisite of your profession but I'd not have taken ignorance as a requirement."

"Ignorance? Explain yourself."

"I'll let Mister Rudge, manager of the Kennart mill, do the explainin'," said the grieve. "He's expectin' this load of timber, which has been paid for and is urgently needed for building work. Might I suggest you extricate the cart from the ditch an' ride along with us an' let Mister Rudge confirm who I am and what –"

The young officer shouted out, "Tell him to unload, Cecil. I have my doubts about this fellow."

"If you wish to count the logs then you must unload them yourself," said Lachlan Sinclair. "Aye, an' put them all back when you are done."

The senior officer had his cutlass across his knees and had lost his erect and haughty seat. Without conviction he said, "We do not take orders from grieves, do you know."

"I do not take interference – for that's all it is – from casual riders, even if they do flaunt a Crown appointment."

The senior officer hesitated, glanced towards his companion who had kept his distance.

"Matt," Lachlan said, "mount the cart. See if it'll draw easy from the ditch or if we'll need to take off the load."

"Aye, Fa – aye, Mister Sinclair."

Vaulting up like a cat, Matt was on the board instantly. He was not rash enough, however, to slap at the big dray horse but coaxed it against the shafts so that the listing wheel rose, rolled and gradually found the solid verge. Behind him, pine poles chattered and squeaked. He whipped his head round expecting to see the casks laid bare, but did not; nor did the younger officer who had galloped briskly past cart and grieve and had turned behind the carrier, peering into it.

"Come then," said Lachlan Sinclair, "if you must have me identified, it can be done in Kennart where you may also watch the timber being unloaded. Follow us down."

The senior officer hung back. "It will not be necessary, grieve."

"I insist upon it," said Lachlan, to Matt's horror.

"Do not jib me too far, sir," said the officer, "or I might take it upon me to arrange a raid upon Ottershaw and a search of your cow-houses and sheep-folds. Be on your way with your timber."

Matt let out his breath. He was standing on the board and gave a yell to prompt the dray horse. He felt the cart dunt against him as its weight nosed forward and the wheels trundled on to the slope that would take it around the corner and on to the bridge. He held tense to prevent himself charging like a charioteer away from the King's Officers.

"Drive steady," Lachlan muttered, riding by his side. "Very steady."

The cart turned down the long corner. Kennart and the basin of the Lightwater lay below them like a harbour. Lachlan glanced quickly behind him.

"Are they – are they –" stammered Matt.

"No, they've stayed," said the grieve. "Now, tell me, what else does the cart contain apart from honest timber?"

"Whisky. Three casks."

"Good God, Matt!"

"Aye, it was fair lucky you came when you did."

"Fair lucky! Is that what you think of it?"

Lachlan Sinclair stretched and caught the check rein, drew the cart to a halt just short of the mouth of the bridge.

Up on the summit of Rowan Hill, distinctive against the sky, stood George Cunningham. His hackles had been instinctively stirred by the presence of Excisemen in the neighbourhood and he had come out to scan the road for sign of his precious cargo. Grieve and forester were aware of the figure on the hilltop though neither remarked it to the other.

"If I had not been makin' a survey by Fumarts Wood," said Lachlan Sinclair, "if I had failed to notice the officers ridin' towards the road, what would have become of you?"

"I'm in no mood for a sermon."

"You'd have been arrested, arraigned, tried and found guilty of transportin' illicit spirits."

"Aye, an' I would have been given a fine of money to pay an' my good, close friends would have paid it for me to secure my freedom."

"Matt, Matt!" said the grieve sadly. "What a trash you're makin' of your life."

"If that's your opinion why do you not dismiss me? Are you not the bloody grieve an' is Ottershaw not more important to you than I am?"

"That's not so," said Lachlan. "But, mark me well on this, I've a limit to tolerance. What can I do if you persist in these infamous associations?"

Blazing with indignation, Matt cried, "An' what of your damned 'associations'?"

"What do you –"

"Aye, you're loyal, fine an' right, Father. Loyal to a bloody fornicator."

Matt was as much shaken by that moment of revelation as by the threatening quarter-hour which had preceded it. He knew; the grieve knew. Matt slumped down hard upon the board, reins in his fists. No denial was possible; no doubt remained. His father was well aware that Anna was Randall Bontine's piece of amusement. It could not be hidden. Truth burned on his father's face.

"Is that why you'll not send me packin'?" said Matt. "Because Randall Bontine would lose Anna?"

"Get on, get on," Lachlan Sinclair snapped. He slapped the dray horse's rump to drive it forward. "Get on with your work."

Matt steered the cart into the bridgegate and over the span, into the sounds of the churning mill-wheel and din from the long buildings, shaken with the aftermath of his experiences on the road. He struggled to control himself for George Cunningham was scurrying towards him, so anxious that he had even taken his hands from his pockets and the pipe from his mouth.

"Was that King's men I saw?"

"It was," said Matt.

"What happened, lad? Did they no' search the cart?"

"I brazened it out," said Matt. "I told them who I was an' what they could do wi' themselves."

"An' the other chap?"

"Nobody of importance," said Matt.

Matt could not have guessed that his father had ridden into the scrub again to hide himself among the stunted growths of the water-meadow and, with a hand over his face, to weep in sorrow and in shame for the son he could not save.

The gaunt Alicia was gone from Ottershaw along with Gibbie and three children, those not yet sent to education, two servants indentured by agreement and every stick of furniture, piece of linen, every plate and glass that she might claim Gibbie had bought. There were also hampers packed with clothes, one of the carriages from the mews and two horses, though Gibbie had to negotiate for the last-named items and pay a price for their possession. If Gilbert had but known, Randall would have donated twice over just to see the back of Alicia and certainly did not count the woman's casual embezzlements as too high a price to be rid of her from his house.

It was the first of the warm, moist days with the air May-sweet and the sun so bright you could hear the grass grow in the pastures and the bubble of sap in the trees around the park. Moodie's Cheviots had lambed like champions. Bleat and blether came loud around the house along with the drone of bee swarms and choruses of sparrows from the stable yard.

To spring's awakening and new beginnings Alicia seemed oblivious.

Alicia was last out of Ottershaw. Sweeping grandly past the sweating men who had lugged out the portables and loaded them on three carts, she took her place in the carriage and snapped at Gibbie to make sure the children had attended to their little businesses because she had no intention of making countless stops along the route and allowing the carters excuse for dawdling. As usual the Bontine children were stowed away, this time among boxes and chests on the last cart. Two tear-stained, snuffling nursery-maids, their worldly goods bound in flop-eared bundles, penned in the darlings who were not at all dismayed at the prospect of dwelling in a castle now that they had been assured, by Gilbert, that there were no dungeons to which Mama might banish them.

Having dutifully checked on the children, Gilbert returned to Randall and shook his brother's hand, a signal that at least he bore no grudge, then, with a fat leather wallet full of important documents under one arm, he clambered into the chaise and gave word for the procession to start away for Strachan Castle.

The coach rumbled into motion, followed by the carts. At that instant, spontaneously, house-servants and yard-hands broke into a tremendous cheer, quite loud enough to cue herders and ploughmen in the fields, even McDonald's men in the forest, all of whom stopped work, flung their bonnets in the air and gave glad voice for the deliverance of their brethren below.

In the coach Alicia sought her husband's hand.

"Do you hear how they honour us, Gilbert, the humble labourers of Ottershaw? It is their way of saying that we will be sorely missed."

"Yes, dearest." Gilbert caught sight of a couple of gardeners in the shadow of a rhododendron performing a jig of obscene celebration. "Sorely missed."

In the kitchen yard at Ottershaw, where Gilbert had made his farewells to the laird, the cheering had grown quite hysterical. It was all Sinclair and Hunter could do to call a halt to it and shoo their sundry charges back to work.

Randall watched the carts toil up to the turnpike and vanish behind the trees. He sighed happily, rubbed his hands and looked up and about as if clouds had lifted from his rooftops and the beeches' silky leaves had sprung out bright green in the moment. "Now," he said, "now let us make the best of this beautiful day."

Randall already had a plan, something he had been saving for the day when Alicia finally left his ken.

"Dunn, tell them at the stable to bring out Sabre, saddled and bridled. Anna, come with me."

"Aye, sir." Dunn scampered off.

Anna hesitated, frowning slightly. "Laird, what are ye intendin' to do with the horse?"

"Try out my leg, Anna."

"On Sabre? Is he not o'er sparky?"

"Full of pith, Anna. But would you have me ride a pony? I am, or was, a Hussar, if you recall. It's the stallion or nothing. I prefer things with a bit of spice in them."

Anna gave him a glance that needed no interpretation.

The zenith of her life was approaching, a peak of experience against which she would balance the misery of her ebbing fortunes in the days ahead, and regard as worth the exchange. There would be other excitements in the span of that short summer but none to match the events of that May-day noon.

Discretion was thrown to the winds now that Alicia had departed. Anna accompanied the laird to his bedroom and there watched him dress himself in breeks of creamed cloth and a riding frock-coat with great gilded buttons which he wore over a flowing silk shirt, unlaced at the throat and without a cravat to spoil it. He pulled on a pair of hessian boots, old friends unearthed from his dunnage in the loft, and clamped about his leg a boot-garter of buckled leather which he spiked so tight that the girl protested that he would stop the blood in his veins.

Randall laughed. She had never seen him so gay, or so relaxed. It was as if Gilbert had taken away the memory of a striving childhood and Alicia, somehow, had lugged off all disappointments. Randall stood up, stamped the boot upon the floor, then, eager and swift, swept Anna into his arms and lifted her toes from the floor, carried her to the bedroom door with him, while she squealed and giggled.

He kissed her on the mouth.

"Today I'm going to ride my horse, Anna, while you watch me in admiration."

"If you do, Randall, I will."

They clattered downstairs, laird and servant-girl.

Mrs Lacy had come out of her kitchen, Hunter too, along with other house-servants, including Brigit, for Dunn had had the head horseman bring the stallion round to the terrace in the full fall of sunlight where the animal pranced and danced, dainty and dreadful, in expectation of a canter and perhaps a full gallop.

It rolled its dark liquid eye at Randall as he approached down the stone steps. He took the reins from the horseman. Anna came forward from the little crowd of servants who stood in the open doorway and joined Dunn, the privileged pair, advanced and acknowledged. She leaned against the acorn-shaped stone ornament at the base of the steps. She had eyes only for Randall as he gentled the horse, steadied it and, with feet together in the broad stirrup, hoisted himself lithely into the saddle. Anna had never seen anything so well done. She clapped her hands in delight at the performance.

No sooner was the laird seated than he had Sabre walking; he knew that the animal was more manageable in motion than at rest, for he shared with the thoroughbred an energy which was wellnigh uncontrollable at times. Randall flowed with the stallion's stride, comfortable, lyrical. If there was pain in the leg and thigh, his joy at being back in the saddle numbed it. Canter accelerated into gallop, mount and rider carried faster away, up the beat by the elms where lambed ewes were scant, rider and mount moving with such poise that the sheep were no more startled than they would have been by a passing gust of wind. If Ottershaw's more heavy-handed stable lads had damaged Sabre there was no sign of it, nor of his volatile temperament. He did not buck or weave, went straight down the length of the park and turned tight to the fist on the rein.

Anna marvelled at how well Randall rode, breeks clear of the saddle, weight into his knees. She should have known him better. Randall Bontine was strong, quicker than any stallion and came down towards the house like a charging lancer, then swiftly eased from gallop to three-beat canter and down again to a high-stepping, arrogant walk which brought him back to the steps of the terrace, beaming, hair tousled, coat peeled back from his chest. The reins lay across his fingers as lightly as spider threads.

The servants did not know how to express their admiration. They murmured warmly and stirred. It was left to Hunter to speak for them. "Well done, sir. It's grand t' see you fit again an' in such braw fettle." The domestics chorused, "Aye, aye, so it is, sir."

Anna alone went forward, not at all intimidated by the unpredictable horse, not while Randall saddled it. She put her hand upon the laird's knee and, while the whole household looked on agog, stared up at him.

"I love you," she mouthed. "Wonderfully."

Randall said, "Would you like to ride him?"

"I canna."

"Have you never ridden?"

"Only a pony, once."

"Take my arm, Anna. Hold to it tightly."

Randall stooped from the saddle. He put his arm about her back, his fingers fanned. She stretched on toe tip and let herself go slack, unresisting, as he swept her from the step and set her deftly across the saddle in front of him.

Sabre whickered loudly, fretted his hoofs but did not rear up and box his forelegs or toss his muscular neck or seek to dislodge the girl. Randall had command of him, was his master too.

"Lean close against me, Anna. Trust me. I shan't let you fall."

She was so high above the ground, elevated to the level of the terrace, staring straight into the astonished faces of the servants, including Brigit and the outraged cook. Anna sat still and slack, folded securely in Randall's arms as if it were the most natural thing in the world to be riding across the saddle with the laird of Ottershaw. She felt the vibrancy of the horse beneath her thighs, the flick of coarse hair as Randall coaxed up Sabre's head and its mane streamed across the backs of her hands and arms. It was as if she had boarded a great, high-prowed ship which went lifting and dipping through a big sea swell. Anna had never seen the sea but she had read of it, imagined it. This was how it must be, lofty and surging and strong, taking possession of you. She had never been more exhilarated and aware of her body.

Buffered by Randall's shoulders and safe in his arms, the stallion's rhythm undulated through her, rolling her at breakneck speed up the parkland away from the house. Just across Randall's collar she could glimpse the façade becoming smaller and smaller, terrace and servants receding, receding, receding, trees and ewes and contours of the hill of Drumglass swishing past in a spectacle of brand-new vistas and perspectives.

Randall was no harsh rider; he did not gallop Sabre, not even to impress Anna. But to the girl the canter seemed like a dash, faster than she had ever travelled before, even on a cart. The oaks and elms whisked away then closed again. She tucked in her head against Randall's chest as the stallion was reined up the banking to the broad track that led away to the west, across the pasture and the scrub to the meadow on the fringe of Fumarts Wood.

Suddenly Anna realised where Randall was taking her; to the tumbled willow where first they had met. So fast was the ride that Anna felt herself sucked back in time. By the overgrown tree she half expected to see Elspeth and Anna Cochran, startled and guilty, to observe herself and her pretty sister through the soldier's eyes, in all their knowing innocence. God, how it had fled, all of it except the daydream of being loved by Randall Bontine.

Randall lowered her from his grasp and slid after her to the ground. He tethered Sabre to a sapling and left the animal quietly cropping the lush grass. Taking Anna by the hand he led her towards the willow.

"Do you know where we are, Anna?"

"How could I ever forget this place?"

"Did you think of it when I was away?"

"Every day, every night, Randall."

The laird leaned against the slope of the big white willow, uprooted by a storm several years ago. He brought the girl to him, breasts against his chest, her stomach pressing his thighs. She had taken off her ribboned mob-cap and her dark hair fluffed about her face and neck.

"Is it not strange," Randall said, soft-voiced with a rare shyness, "that I dreamed of you when I was fevered? In a nunnery in the mountains of Spain. How far it seemed from Ottershaw."

"Why did you come back?"

"I was summoned. It was my duty. Besides, I was no use as a cavalry soldier with this." He clamped his hand upon his leg." No use to anyone."

"But you can ride again now," said Anna. "Will you go back to fight against the Frenchies?"

Randall laughed. "I have resigned my commission, Anna. In any case two miles upon Sabre's back is little enough. My limb would not stand the strain of a half-day's ride."

"Would you go back, though, if you could?"

"Aye, in an instant."

"Leave Ottershaw?"

"Ottershaw must always be second-best."

"Leave me?"

"Perhaps I might take you with me."

"Elope with me?"

"Abduct you," Randall said.

Pulling Anna closer still, he kissed her throat and mouth.

Anna responded, rubbing her body against his until, swiftly, he was aroused.

She drew him down upon the grass at the base of the white willow, lay under him while he made himself ready and bundled up her skirt and petticoats. He entered her with dominating force, a hard profane passion that made Anna cry aloud and arch herself up, knifed by astonishment, then, flowing with him, wrap her arms tightly about his back as he drove on through pleasure and sensation to a final effort of release.

Randall made love to her again that afternoon and often in the summer days that followed. But Anna was never in any doubt that it was during the coupling by the willow tree that her son by the laird was conceived.

NINE

The Wind on the Hill

A mutter of August thunder across the Campsie Fells brought Elspeth out of sleep. Without her knowledge and without James's permission, Doctor Carstairs had administered a tincture of laudanum via the jug of rice water that stood on the chest for the patient's refreshment, laudanum being the young physician's specific against most ailments, including those which might arise from childbirth.

Carstairs was not at all disposed to attend women in labour. He performed the task of male midwife only for families who insisted upon it and who would meet his exorbitant fee but then, in general, did exactly the proper thing by leaving nature to get on with it without excessive intervention in the process. However, he was a 'doser' of the new school and could not resist slipping a few drops of sedative into Mistress Moodie's drink in spite of the fact that the labour had been of short duration and the birth achieved without complication.

Threatened miscarriage early in pregnancy did not seem to have affected the infant in the slightest. She came slithering out into swaddles of warm linen and mewed petulantly when Carstairs inverted her to clean and to inspect. He judged her weight to be about seven pounds and found her well formed and apparently healthy.

"Is it . . . is it sound in all parts?" gasped the anxious girl from the bed, invariably the very first question to be asked by mothers high-born or low.

"Perfectly sound. Perfectly fine."

"What – what is it?"

"A female. A girl child."

The mother, of course, was young and sturdy and seemed exceedingly eager to embrace the responsibilities of motherhood. For an event as basically indelicate and disagreeable as a birthing it had all gone swimmingly. Carstairs lingered long enough to ensure that all was well then went downstairs to pass the news to the proud father in the library and to collect, there and then, his banknote for fifty guineas. He was off home again by two o'clock in the afternoon, a mere seven hours after his arrival, leaving mother and daughter in the care of trusted servants.

Naturally Elspeth viewed the matter rather differently from the doctor. But she had not found the pain unendurable and had clutched at the bedhead rail and screamed aloud only in the very latter stages. She was not so far gone in the grip of contractions that she did not feel just a tiny bit ashamed of her display with Kerr and Betty and the man doctor gathered about in the shadows. It had not been quite such a frightful experience as she had been led to believe it might be and her hours of suffering were amply repaid by that wonderful moment of empty relief, by the knowledge that she had delivered her baby alive, "Perfectly sound. Perfectly fine," and by the fact that it was a girl.

In the aftermath of effort, before she slept her first sleep, even before she held the little morsel to her breast for her first feed, Elspeth realised that all along she had wished for a girl in preference to a boy.

It seemed more 'right', more 'moral', that she had brought forth a child of her own sex, not a son who might resemble Michael, might in later years remind her too much of Michael. A girl would be more her own, would belong to her as she had belonged to Gaddy, close and intimate and easier to understand. Drifting into sleep, Elspeth felt that Michael at last was drifting away from her, drifting off like a light summer cloud. She did not regret it, not now that she had a baby of her own, a daughter upon whom she could shower her love.

Kerr awakened her about five o'clock with a glass of weak tea to heal her thirst. Kerr helped her move from the bed to a chair, changed bed-linen and Elspeth's night-frock, gave her a sponge before slipping a clean, sweet-smelling dress over her head. Elspeth, wide awake, was acutely conscious of Betty in the corner by the screen and the tiny discontented sounds that came from the lace-draped cradle. She had no patience with ritual preparations but endured them quietly because she too wanted everything to be just perfect, just right.

"Mister Moodie came up," Kerr told her. "He lookit in at the baby. He'll come back up later, he says, when the wee one's had her nourishment."

Betty had control of the nursery while Tolland did reluctant nursing duty in Mother Moodie's sick-room.

Betty had no time for eighteenth-century fiddle-faddle. Though she had no children of her own, she had helped raise three sisters and had learned from her mother's 'sensible' approach to their care.

The Moodie baby was not to be swathed, swaddled or subjected to the perils of pins, except to affix its napkins. She was brought to Elspeth in Betty's arms, clad in a shirt of brushed cambric, her cross little visage framed in a cap of white linen and a bonnet of softest wool. Her toes and fingers, which Elspeth anxiously counted, wriggled, her activity not calmed until her mouth was guided to Elspeth's nipple and her cheek pressed against her mother's breast.

"Should she not be more still?" asked Elspeth as she felt the strong tug of the baby's gums for the first time.

Arms folded, Betty stood by the bed-end, no smile upon her lips but a warmth and tenderness in her eyes. "Nah, nah. She'll be still enough when she's filt hersel' up. She's as fine a wee bairnie as ever you'll see, Mistress Moodie, so dinna fret yoursel' otherwise."

"Is she gettin' milk from me, Betty?"

"See her cheeks chuff? She's gettin'. If she fails t' find suck she'll let us all know it right quick, so she will."

When the feeding was over the baby gave a satisfied little snort and instantly fell asleep, still at last in Elspeth's arms where Betty prudently left her for a quarter of an hour before putting her down in the cradle by the screen.

It had been a warm day, without sun but not oppressive. A small, guarded fire had been lighted in the hearth and Kerr swept about the grate and put on a few sticks to cheer the curtained room. Elspeth was inclined to ask for the curtains to be thrown back and a casement opened, to look out into the August evening sky; but she was afraid that a draught or chill would catch the baby and Betty was not quite so liberated as to suggest fresh air as a stimulant for a weary young mother, let alone a new-born infant.

James came at six, knocking very uncertainly upon the door and awaiting Kerr's permission to enter.

He had, Elspeth thought, dressed himself up grandly for the occasion. He wore a frock-coat of very best broadcloth and a snuff-coloured waistcoat with gold buffs and buttons, was smooth-shaven and groomed and as formal as a courtier. She could see, though, when he came first to the bed and bent to kiss her brow, how the cradle tugged at his attention, how he did not particularly wish to linger with her, not at first, but take himself to the screen and gaze down upon the girl child.

What was going on in her husband's head and heart was a mystery to Elspeth. She believed that she detected a shine of pride on him and he let his lips rest upon her forehead for a moment longer than usual. In spite of her uncertainty she felt a stir of affection for James. After all, she had deceived him, and he had stood by her. The baby was not his flesh and blood, yet he was proud of it.

Tongue-tied, James murmured, "Are you – have you – is it well with you, dearest."

"Aye. She's taken milk."

"Oh!"

He hovered, glancing behind him, embarrassed.

Betty had gone downstairs to eat supper and then to sit with Mother Moodie while Tolland scrounged through the kitchen to raise a decent dinner for the master. But the life of the household seemed distant to Elspeth. She trusted Betty, Kerr and Tolland to ensure that her welfare and that of the baby was not neglected.

"May I –" James gestured.

"Of course you may. She's -" Elspeth snipped off the remark; she was not his, not James's.

In time perhaps she might be able to dispense with such caution, when the baby had grown and been accepted and James had put the memory of her infidelity behind him. There would be no more children for her now. The future of the family must centre around her daughter.

James went to the cradle and stood for all of ten minutes, quite silent, watching the infant sleep. He did not croon to her or make any sound of affection but, from time to time, he would give a curt nod as if he were shaking the water of approval upon her brow.

Before James left Elspeth was almost asleep again. It was all she could do to keep her eyes open, to smile at him when he gave her a parting kiss.

"Is she not lovely?" Elspeth whispered.

"Quite lovely," said James.

Betty had become Elspeth's clock. On the servant's return, Elspeth was awakened to give her breast to her daughter, two feedings in the hours between evening and full dark. Kerr would sleep in a cot in the closet, with an open door, and would attend both mother and baby, as required, during the night. Betty would not be far away, in her cramped room adjacent to Mother Moodie's room.

Elspeth, who had no hunger yet, only thirst, drank from the flagon of rice water that the doctor had left, then bid the maids good night and turned lightly – pleasantly lightly – into the pillow. All was safe, all was well.

She wakened two hours later. Suddenly.

She knew immediately that it was thunder. Panic gripped her, jerked her painfully from the bolster. Thunder. August thunder. She gaped towards the curtained windows, expecting to see a jagged flash of lightning, expecting the low sinister rumble to break into a deafening peal, to crack the rooftop and bring beams and slates crashing down on the cradle in the corner. Since the day of the great storm, the night of the flood when the hut on the Nettieburn had been swept away, taking with it the settled pleasures of her girlhood and youth, Elspeth had dwelt in mortal terror of thunder and torrential rain.

On the mantelshelf a night-lantern flickered. The fire had collapsed to grey ash and gave no extra light. By candle-shine, though, Elspeth could make out the rearing shape of the lace cowl of the cradle and imagined it, against all reason, to be some ghostly presence which threatened her baby with harm.

"Kerr?" Her voice had dried to a croak. "Kerr, where are you?"

But Kerr was young and slept deeply, head buried in the blanket in the confinement of the closet.

Thunder rippled again. Sense told Elspeth that it was distant, that she need not fear sound by itself. But her emotions were whirled about by fear and she had come so suddenly out of slumber that reality had the eccentric vividness of nightmare.

"Kerr?"

No answer, not even a snore, from the closet.

Shaking, Elspeth flung aside the bedclothing. She swung her feet to the floor. Her gown was damp with perspiration. She had not, at first, the strength to support herself. She clung to the side of the bed and dragged herself down its length towards the screen, towards the cradle. Her legs were like reed pith. Bare feet upon the carpet rolled as upon a sprinkle of tiny glass balls. But another grumble of thunder spurred her on. She let go of the support of the bed and struggled unsteadily to the cradle.

The position of the lantern had been arranged to keep direct light from falling into the cradle and lace diffused the candle's radiance and cast a strange, eerie aura about the baby's bed. Elspeth felt momentarily relieved. She had reached her new-born child, could protect her now. Her lips shaped into a little soft smile as she leaned forward.

The blanket was folded neatly. The flat silk pillow held in its centre the indentation of the little head. But the cradle was empty, her baby gone.

For once Anna knew where Matt intended to spend the night. He had told her – and had no need now for prevarication or lies – that he would be engaged in the running of a batch of still-whisky, assisting Pad Tomelty in a howff near Eardmore.

McDonald would see to it that Matt had a job of work in the forest which would allow him to slip off in mid-afternoon, make the long trail up the ridgeway before evening. It did not occur to Anna that Brigit, after she left Ottershaw, might also strike out for Eardmore to spend a few hours in Matt's arms. Anna had no clue that her husband and fellow-servant were erstwhile lovers. She had heard, of course, that Excisemen, abetted by a couple of King's Officers, were on patrol about the Lennox. But Brigit imparted very little hard information on the threat, just sneered at and scorned the inefficiency of the tax collectors and assured all and sundry that her father was far too clever to be laid by the heels – again.

Life within the house of Ottershaw had been reasonably placid during the summer months. With Gilbert gone, and his leg healed enough to enable him to ride, Randall was out and about for much of the day. He showed no inclination to involve himself in sporting groups or societies, a number of which courted his interest, or in the social round which was available to landed gentlemen, ponds flickering with eligible young girls whose mamas would be only too delighted to dower them away to a handsome bachelor landowner. Randall's predilection for more-or-less candid dallying with servant-girls put off all but the more ardent Dianas and his reputation grew charcoal-black as summer progressed and invitations and blandishments were not just refused but ignored.

Gilbert and Alicia had settled well into Strachan Castle, so well apparently that Alicia did not return to Ottershaw at all, not even to spy upon her brother-in-law. Gibbie turned up once or twice in the month to try to persuade Randall to make investment in the Farmers' Bank of Falkirk in which he, Gibbie, had purchased a partnership since Mr Angus Hildebrand had expressed guarded enthusiasm for the project. With the time of crop sales and the big autumn cattle marts approaching, however, Gibbie too had a press of business upon him and he did not show his face at Ottershaw at all in August.

It was the first full night that Anna had ever spent at Ottershaw. The arrangement was easily managed with the collusion of the redoubtable Hunter. A side door was left open; Anna departed at her usual hour, returned after dark. She was waiting for the laird when he came upstairs after late supper in the dining-room.

Love-making occupied the couple for a time, but the activity upon the bed was not now so prolonged or so fierce as it had been in the early months of summer. It was not that Anna had lost her enthusiasm or her longing to please the laird, or that Randall found her any less desirable; the plain, revealed fact of Anna's pregnancy made the relationship tender and more loving but less prolonged.

Unlike her sister, Anna had not kept the news of her pregnancy to herself for long. Almost as soon as suspicion of her condition came to her she had informed Randall. The laird, as was his way, had behaved unpredictably. He had not thrown her out or begun the process of disassociating himself from the relationship, both of which courses were open to a man in his position. Anna might have created a great fuss – but who would have paid her much heed? The 'scandal' was local and accepted. Those who could not come to terms with it pretended to ignore it. The advent of a love-child, in and of itself, would not spot the laird's reputation much worse than it was at present and all the little tensions and strains that the birth of a bastard might entail could be eased by parental practicality.

"Can you be sure that the child is not of your husband's making?"

Anna had answered honestly. "Not absolutely."

"How absolutely?"

"I think we made the bairn on the Monday of Whit."

Randall had laughed ruefully. "It would not surprise me, Anna, if we had made ten bairns on that day."

"It was that time, Randall, I'm sure of it."

"Will your husband imagine that the child's his?"

"Aye, he might. He's daft enough."

"I wouldn't wish that," Randall had said.

"What can we do?"

"I cannot possibly marry you."

"Aye, I know it."

"I mean, Anna, I could not marry you even if –"

"In two years o' marriage Matt never gave me a bairn."

"It's not the blood-line, Anna."

Anna, the dreamer, had quickly come to terms with reality.

"I want nothin', Randall, except that you keep me near you," she had said.

"What if – what if I decide, some day, that I must marry? I'm a Bontine, Anna. I might eventually feel that Ottershaw must have legitimate heirs."

"Do you feel that now?"

"I don't know, quite, what I feel now. No, I do not have any urge to seek a wife."

"What can we do, Randall?"

"Sinclair's the problem."

"Matt, do ye mean?"

"I was thinking more of my grieve. I wouldn't like to be without his services."

"Need he be told at all, about the bairn I mean?"

Randall had frowned. "If only –"

Anna was suddenly tense. "If only what?"

"If only we could be rid of your husband. He's the encumbrance to our arrangements," Randall had said. "If it was not for him, I could look after you. Aye, the child would be a bastard, no help for it, but you would be cared for, Anna, you and your babe."

"Can you not send Matt away?"

Randall had shaken his head emphatically. "I've no justification for it. What would be my excuse; that I want his wife?"

"What can we do, then?"

"Let me mull it over in my mind, Anna."

Now it was August, bordering September; Anna had grown quite plump, not so much about the abdomen but generally. Being Gaddy's true-born, she found her condition natural and had no fear of it. Fortunately she did not suffer many of the inconveniences of pregnancy, only increased appetite and a tenderness of the breasts. She considered it ironic that 'Pet should be so coddled, wrapped in wool in Moodie's mansion while she, bearing an heir to the Bontine family, was obliged to skiddle about her servant's duties and keep some sort of trim for Matt at Pine Cottage. At least she was not turned out to hoe weeds or for harvest gatherings, for Hunter drew the line at permitting 'his' staff to soil their hands with clay, eschewing the 'old ways' in these enlightened times.

Bitterness in Anna's marriage had dwindled. For somebody who doubted that sexual pleasure could be an enduring bond between a gentleman and a drove-wifie's daughter, then the attitude of Randall Bontine and Anna Sinclair to the impending event might seem cold-blooded.

The rough-hewn folk of the villages, let alone the doyens of Lennox society, could not have deduced how akin were the laird and the servant lass. The settlement which must be forged between them would contain few selfish advantages for either one, and the child, though not recognised, would never want for food and shelter. The bairn might have no civil rights, as would a lawful child, but would have Randall Bontine for father and Anna for mother and that would be enough natural material advantage for any son or daughter to inherit in the world. But there was Matt; Matt would surely be accounted father since Anna was his wife and had had connection with him within the period of gestation. For the good of her bairn's welfare and future, Matt Sinclair had to go out of her life.

That night, after love, Anna lay in Randall's arms in the huge island of a bed, not dulled by the exercise but with wits sharpened.

"Have you thought yet what we can do, Randall?"

"I've thought that we might – I might – confront him with the state of things and offer him a tidy sum to leave you and go abroad."

"America, maybe?"

"Well, hardly so far, Anna. Unless he wished it."

"We could concoct a rare story about that," said Anna. "Sayin' how Matt would send for me when he was settled. Even old Sinclair might believe it."

"No, not the Colonies," said Randall. "Perhaps Ireland. I could find him a position with my Uncle Alexander."

Anna sat up. "You're not thinkin' o' sendin' me there?"

"Calm yourself," Randall said. "I have no power, no inclination, to send you anywhere."

"All I ask is that I stay near you."

"What would this husband of yours take to leave Balnesmoor?"

"He'll resist. Not out of pride, out of malice," said Anna. "I know him. He'll do it for spite. He'll claim the bairn's his, though he'll know fine well it's not."

"How will he know?"

"Because I'll tell him."

"Do you hate Matt Sinclair so much, Anna?"

"Not hate; despise."

"Divorce, even if Sinclair could be made to agree to it, would take four years, after 'desertion' of husband, that is."

"Four years?"

"Your husband, of course, might divorce you," Randall said. "But then he would be obliged to cite a basis for the action and I fear that would be difficult to prove."

"I could show my baby t' the judges."

"Do you suppose that the child will bear such a striking resemblance to me that a judgement would be incontrovertible?"

Anna did not understand. She did not invite an explanation. She had condensed things down, simplified them with that high disregard for consequences which was her style. Anna had had an idea.

"I see little to chuckle about," said Randall.

The girl leaned across to touch the laird's scarred chest with her fingernails.

Outside the mansion thunder expanded the air over Drumglass and made the Cheviots restless in the park below Ottershaw, induced the ewes to bleat for their fat-grown lambs. It was not the panic roars that signalled that foxes were among the flock and Randall hardly registered the sounds, being intent upon Anna and her sudden skittish delight.

"Out with it," Randall murmured.

"My husband smuggles whisky for Pad Tomelty."

"So you've informed me. What of it?"

Anna dabbed a kiss on to her fingertips and planted it on the laird's lips.

"We'll turn him over," she said.

Randall sat up, hand on the girl's shoulder. "Turn him over?"

"To the Excisemen."

"Good God, Anna, that's harsh business, is it not?"

"Turn him over when we know he'll be carryin' kegs."

"I see no point in –"

"He'll sell the lot o' them. I know my husband. Matt'll tell all to save his neck."

"Smuggling's not a hanging offence, Anna, not unless he attacks an officer. At the worst of it he'll receive a sentencing to six months in Stirling jail."

"But if he peaches on Tomelty, he canna show his face near here again."

Randall took his hand from her shoulder and stroked his chin thoughtfully. "For fear of a reprisal from the smuggling gang?"

"Aye," said Anna eagerly. "An' you would offer him shelter."

"Where? In Ireland?"

"Ireland it would be."

"But he would wish you to go with him, would he not?"

"I would refuse."

"He'll never leave you, not if he thinks you're carrying his child."

"He'll not know, Randall. Don't ye see?" Anna said. "An' old Lachlan will thank ye for it too. I can stay on. Be near you, be here in Ottershaw for ever."

"It's a harsh thing, Anna."

"It could be so easily brought to pass."

Randall lowered himself to the pillows. He let his hand idly toy with her dark hair but did not at that moment meet her eye.

At length he said, "Let me enquire about the niceties of the law; that done, I'll consider it further."

"How long will you consider?"

Randall shrugged his shoulders. "Three days or four; a week at most."

Anna pursed her lips.

"Very well," she said.

But, always impulsive and quite obsessed with the brilliance of her scheme, Anna could not contain herself for one whole week. Before Randall could converse with Hildebrand, let the idea float, Anna had acted on her own account and unwittingly brought Matt into murder.

Elspeth's cry finally wakened Kerr who, rubbing her eyes, stumbled out of the closet and put her arms reassuringly about her mistress.

"She's – she's –"

"Ach, it's all right. Dinna be feared she's come t' harm."

"Where – where –" Gasping, Elspeth could not frame the question.

"Mister Moodie came in an' took her. About ten minutes since, that's all. He told me t' lie quiet an' not t' wake you since you were sleepin' so deep. He'll bring her back soon, I'm sure."

Kerr's arm about her did not much comfort Elspeth but the maid's explanation was credible and dulled the first shock of the empty cradle. It would be James, was typical of James.

"Och, but you're tremblin', Mistress Elspeth," said Kerr. "I'll awa' downstairs an' find the master."

"No," Elspeth managed. "I'll – you go back t' bed. I'll go down myself."

"You canna, in your condition."

"I'm not in any 'condition', Kerr." Elspeth sounded convincing. "I wish to go downstairs to join my husband."

"Let me fetch Betty."

"Kerr, will you go back t' your cot. At once."

Kerr hesitated. "Aye, Mistress Elspeth. If you're sure you'll –"

"Give me my robe."

Kerr held it out and Elspeth, hardly knowing how she supported herself, slipped her arms into the sleeves and drew the light garment about her. She was sore about the stomach but the initial weakness was passing. She was infused with a determination which stemmed from suspicion and, beneath it, a fear which she could not nominate at this hour of the muttering night.

Leaving Kerr, Elspeth opened the door and went out into the corridor. James had not gone downstairs. She needed no more guidance than the band of light beneath Mother Moodie's door to tell her where her husband had taken her child.

Fear grew in Elspeth again, pushing aside her debility. She went along the corridor and paused. She could hear her husband's voice and, very faintly, the tiny, fractious cry of her baby. She opened the door and slipped into the old woman's sick-room.

A battened screen with pastoral tapestry studded to its frame defended the area of the door, keeping out unwelcome draughts. Elspeth stood behind it, shoulder-blades pressed for support against the wall. She could see the blaze of a candelabrum, the impish flicker of firelight upon the ceiling, hear James clearly.

"Mammy, Mammy," James crooned. "Can you see her? Is she not bonnie? Would she not break your heart, being so bonnie?" He sang a snatch of a psalm tune, throaty and soothing, then said, "Aye, she's as bonnie as Bell was. My Isobel. She's her mother's fair features, though, as ye can see. Look, Mammy, please look at her. Your blood. Your great-grand-daughter. My grandchild."

Elspeth did not take in the import of James's address. She was listening nervously for some response from the old woman, for a voice to come out of the corpse-like bundle that would be propped in the chair or in the wooden bed. They went past her comprehension, the words that James had uttered and their true meaning. He did not repeat them.

Instead there came a faint whimper, not from the baby but from the old woman. It was the first sound Elspeth had heard Mother Moodie emit in eight or nine months that might not be other than random coincidence. She strained her ears, eaned heavily upon the wall to brace herself. She did not now what to do. Should she show herself, join James in the lark, proud exhibition of a grandchild to Mary Jean Moodie? Should she remain hidden by the screen or slip away now that she had established that her baby was safe? Yet Elspeth did not, in her skin and nerves, believe that her baby was safe in her husband's arms. The ritual of this night-showing distressed her, the thought that James might hold the new-born forward to be kissed by the raddled, spit-dribbled lips of the crone, trying to force his mother out of dementia in one final, talismanic moment of love.

"James."

Elspeth propelled herself away from the wall and came around the screen.

The sight that met her eyes inflamed her fear. It was not anything untoward in the scene, for the infant was snug in a shawl in James's strong arms and not close to the withered figure in the bed. Mother Moodie, who could not breathe while lying down, slept in an upright position, huge straw bolsters thrusting her chest forward and those vile leather straps around her, even at night, restraining and supporting the frail body. Her wig had been removed. Her hair was as scant and close to the bone-white scalp as lichen on a stone. Her eyes were wide open, wrinkled lids affixed. She stared – perhaps – at the little form in her son's arms.

The lips did move. Words did come; not words but sounds, just sounds, no more shaped and no more meaningful than the noises that the baby herself might make in a week or two, and hardly stronger.

"Ba – ba – ba – bah."

"Baby, Mother," James urged, oblivious to Elspeth's presence. "Aye, a baby. Baby Moodie. A wee lass. See. See her."

"Fa – fa – fa – fath."

"Aye, aye, Mammy. Speak."

Riven, silent, Elspeth watched the struggle for communication. She could not believe that Mother Moodie had made any real connection, only that the insistence of her son had sparked a moment of energy in the dying brain. Her tongue was a dried leather thong rolling in the half-open mouth, language itself forgotten.

"Fath-th-fath-tay."

"Say it," James urged. "Say 'father'."

He stepped closer to the bed, turned the baby in his arms and held her upright like a doll.

"See her. She's ours. Can you not say 'father'?"

Elspeth could stand no more of it.

"James, stop. Please stop."

Whatever half-spell James had woven was broken by the girl's interruption.

Mother Moodie's eyes flickered and closed. As if exhausted by the effort she seemed to fall instantly asleep, head flopping against the leather straps, a bubble of saliva at the corner of her lips.

James swung round. He did not seem awkward with the baby but lowered her lightly into his arms again, cradling her. She fretted slightly, her little fists bunched by her chin. He inclined his shoulder over the bundle as if to indicate that he would not yet relinquish her, not even to Elspeth.

"How long have you been there?" James snarled.

"I just came."

"Should you not be asleep?"

He was angry with her for intruding. It had not occurred to him that he had given her a horrid fright.

"What did you hear?" was her husband's next question. "Did you see? Did you see how Mother knew me?"

"Yes, I saw."

"Leave her with me, then. Let her stay here with me."

"James, for God's sake, give her to me."

He glanced from the child to his mother and then, querulously, at his wife, his daughter.

"I must feed her," said Elspeth.

Her heart was palpitating. Her legs trembled under the robe but she would not show him weakness. It did not seem to strike James that she should not have been here at all, that he might harm her in this vulnerable period. Elspeth's fear shifted its axis, but she was outwardly calm and reasonable.

"Give her to me now, James, because it's so late. You can bring her to show to your mother tomorrow."

He crouched, almost dwarf-like. The fire flung his shadow in a grotesque, bent shape across the far wall of the room. Then, gradually, he straightened, became calm and concerned too.

"Did the thunder waken you?"

"Aye," said Elspeth.

"You should not be on your feet. You might do yourself injury, Elspeth."

"I – I am tired."

"Come." James put an arm tentatively about her, holding the baby snug against his chest. "I'll carry her to her crib. Lean on me, dearest."

James appeared to be himself again, kindness itself. He was concerned for her health and contrite about his thoughtless behaviour in removing the baby without her knowledge and permission. He escorted Elspeth back to bed, saw to it that Kerr settled both mother and infant.

Elspeth watched James go out of the room, heard the creak of the boards as he went away, not to his bedroom but downstairs to the hallway. She was shaking, sweating, but all notion of sleep had gone. Across the hills thunder still muttered but it had come no closer and Elspeth hardly heard it now.

"Kerr."

"Aye, Mistress Elspeth?"

"Kerr, bolt the door."

"But –"

"Bolt the damned door when I tell you."

Startled, the servant did as she was ordered without daring to question the reason.

Four days later, in the middle of the morning, Mother Moodie lapsed into unconsciousness and, before noon, was obviously and mercifully dead.

Celebration turned to mourning in Moss House.

And September began with rain.

Attitudes towards James Simpson Moodie and his executives had changed during the course of the summer, creating divisions which had not been recognised before the arrival of George and Trina Cunningham and the establishment of the shop under Rowan Hill. For reasons which Rudge could not fathom the Cunninghams were protected by old man Moodie. By extension they were part of the circle of authority, on almost an equal footing with Scarf and he – not a situation that Rudge wore lightly.

The shopkeepers were discreet in the manner of 'tapping cash'; that is, they did not actually turn up at the manager's office on Saturday afternoons to claw off their owings in person. But it was because of the Cunninghams that paying days became fraught with tensions, because of the Cunninghams that Baynham the smith was obliged to stand by the table while the count-out was in progress.

Weavers who had ignored their wives' spendthrift habits, who had enjoyed good meat three or four times in the week, lads with a large capacity for whisky, coffee and tobacco addicts might well find that their dip from the oblong box on Mr Rudge's table had been reduced to a mere copper or two or even to nothing at all and, when shouting for dues, would be politely shown the ticket which had come down from the shop and reminded that credit was not unlimited.

When credit stopped, a man was condemned to a week or fortnight of gnawing on the knuckle, to hearing his bairns whimper from hunger, to humping his pride and scrounging on neighbours who had been less profligate than he. Boozers took it hardest of all. They believed that they had a right to special treatment, that the tap should not be turned off for them.

What galled Rudge most of all was that the Cunninghams never refused a customer credit over the counter and seemed, by inference, kind and generous friends of the workers. He, on the other hand, was put in the invidious position of doing their collecting for them, of saying *No*, of appearing to be a flint-hearted villain. He received glares, ugly insults, temper fits in the Cunninghams' stead while the couple remained snug in their shop, safe from the sordid business of debt collection.

If it had not been for the looming presence of Smith Baynham there would have been fisticuffs and brawls in or about the office and men would have been dismissed on the spot, making more work for the managers and causing even more ill-feeling. Baynham no longer played constable to the Cunninghams. He refused to patrol the stretch from the road-end to the shop; that, the smith claimed, was not Kennart and what went on there was none of his concern and must be sorted out by the traders.

On four or five occasions during June and July, Rudge had broached the problem with James Moodie. He had found the owner less than responsive, hardly receptive and not at all supportive. Moodie, with his rake-away from shop profits, had always been a man who believed in acquiring wealth by any means. What respect Rudge had nurtured for the self-made weaver faded like the blue of poor calico in summer weathers. By August he, Rudge, felt that he was the main prop of the weaving hamlet, its cornerstone against collapse.

George and Trina were not ignorant of the narrowness of the line which separated them from their just desserts. They had chestfuls of notes and coins buried here and there about Rowan Hill. Their expenditure on stock did not come near their income and, in the months of field-work, the shop drew customers from all around. Beer and spirits pulled in the pounds. A touch of extra salt or mustard in meats and pies did not harm the palates of tillers and sowers, hoe-women and harvesters, who came to the counter for refreshment.

George and Trina did not fear the accumulated wrath of the folk of Kennart. They had the protection of James Moodie and might twist the screw on him a good bit yet and, if trouble threatened from another quarter, might turn it in the direction of the owner's door without a qualm, knowing that Jamie would stand up for them against any odds since he had even less choice in the matter than he'd had before his dear young bride got filled with child.

On hot nights, when the long day's labour was over, George and Trina, worn out by affability, would top a jug with gin and lemon and carry it out to the stump at the front of the shop. There they would sit, buttock to buttock, staring up at the stars scattered along the blue edge of the afterglow. They would share the liquor jug, turn about and philosophise on Providence and Sin and let their imaginations wander to the future.

"She'll drop any day now, I'm thinkin'," Trina would say. "I've heard she's heavy."

"How did ye hear that, my love?"

"From yon lassie who sparks wi' Luke McWilliams."

"Luke McWilliams?"

"Moodie's young coachman."

"Oh, aye. Is it Stewart Murray's daughter he's makin' cow-eyes at?"

"The same. She tells me how Moodie's wife has not been seen 'cept about the gardens this last month and how she's big as a barrel at the front."

"Is it this month, though?"

"It canna be much longer, unless she's droppin' a pair."

George would laugh, sip from the jug. "Twice as much grief for the weaver mannie, eh?"

"If they're his at all."

"Now, now, dearest! How could they be otherwise than his since she's not reputed t' be the 'independent' kind? Have ye heard t' the contrary?"

"The bairn's his, George. Who else could have done it?"

"By God, it's disgustin'."

"Waitin' twenty year t' find another Bell."

George would shake his head, pass the jug, suck on his pipe, stare up at the stars. "How can a man do that?" he would ask the heavens.

Trina would sigh, wheeze, drink. "When the bairn's a year, we'll bring Moodie in on the rope, eh? I've no taste for all this space, George. As ye know I'll be fell glad t' get back to my home town again, t' the city."

"Rich, Trina, rich. We'll go home rich."

"Rich enough, I suppose," Trina would say, since her definition of riches was not limited by surfeit any more than it was by necessity.

During spring and summer the Cunninghams crossed not a word with Mr Moodie, glimpsed him only at a distance. Monthly payments due to the mill-owner were punctiliously reckoned, changed into banknotes and despatched to Moss House in the bag of one of the mail-delivering McGowans. No receipt was expected or received.

George might have settled for Kennart, might have dug his roots in deep. Eventually he might have employed a lassie to do the cleaning and baking, a lad to heave sacks and take turn at the serving-counter. But he knew Trina too well to believe that they had taken their last cart-ride together. Trina would work with a will; it was not laziness but restlessness which would eventually drive her out of the rustic haven and back to the bustle of dear old Glasgow. George laid his plans accordingly.

In eighteen months or so he would offer the shop as a going concern, sell the 'business' to Mr Moodie. Mr Moodie would not quibble over the price or the cash value of the 'goodwill' that they had laboured to build up. Money thus earned added to money diligently saved would be invested to provide a comfortable income. And if they ever ran short they might return to Balnesmoor for a visit and approach their benefactor, James Simpson Moodie, in the sure-fire knowledge that he would grant them a 'loan' to tide them over.

The birth of a Moodie girl child, the Cunninghams believed, added strength to their schemes. George composed yet another flowery letter in which he offered congratulations and conferred finest blessings on mother and daughter. Unfortunately for him the letter arrived on Mr Moodie's dinner-plate on the day that his mother passed to meet her Maker; George could hardly be held to blame for that piece of ill-timing.

Details of the Moodies' doings travelled swiftly to the shopkeepers' ears. Matt Sinclair was an excellent source of news, for the young forester was garrulous when in drink. Luke McWilliams, who had served Moodie for years and had never forgiven the weaver for discarding him from Moss House when the wife arrived, slipped down to Kennart now and then in pursuit of Stewart Murray's daughter and would stop for a dram at the shop where he would pour out intimacies ten to the dozen.

It was from McWilliams that the Cunninghams heard how Mother Moodie had been buried with all the pomp and ceremony usually reserved for a queen. Jamie Moodie had followed the carriage from Moss House to the kirk, walking alone in advance of the other mourners. Old Jamie had a face on him like a thunder cloud, so furious and severe that nobody hardly dared speak with him even to offer the hand of condolence. It was a manly funeral with a big procession. The laird was there, Gibbie from Strachan Castle, Rudge, Scarf and even McAlpin; the notables added to by thirty or forty strangers in from all parts, men with whom Moodie did trade and who did not want to offend the producer of quality cloths.

"How did he comport himself? Did he weep?"

"Moodie? Nah, not him! He ground his teeth like millstones but never shed a tear."

From Matt Sinclair the Cunninghams heard how Gilbert Bontine returned to Moss House a few days after the funeral, stayed for half the morning and went away all chirruping and smiling; how the Ottershaw flock of Cheviots had been gathered up from the parks and shepherded along the turnpike and up the lane on to clean, cleared pastures on Dyers' Dyke; how parcels of new-bought Blackface began to arrive on Ottershaw soon after. From Matt the Cunninghams also learned that Moodie appeared as proud as a bloody peacock of his new-born daughter and was forever strutting about the house with the shawled baby, showing her off so much it was a wonder the poor infant didn't split at the seams with so much handling.

Neither McWilliams nor Matt Sinclair, however, brought the Cunninghams news of the letter that Mr Moodie despatched to Kilsyth, the last in a series, or of the rendezvous that was arranged between the weaver and a man named Fitter for an evening hour in the disreputable parlour of the Old Thorn Inn on Glasgow's outskirts. Matt would surely have recognised the features of the said Mr Fitter for it was a face you were not likely to forget. But nobody at all learned of that meeting, which lasted only a quarter of an hour, or of what passed there between the men.

If the Cunninghams had heard of it, being of a sly sort of disposition themselves, they might have twigged that something unpleasant was afoot, though not even George and Trina could have guessed that Mr Moodie, through the agency of Mr Fitter, planned to be rid of them, not just from Kennart but for good and all.

At one time, not so long since, Matt Sinclair might have been as puffed up as a bantam cock but he was not entirely stupid. The encounter with the King's Officers in March had badly shaken him. Nonetheless he was committed to a lawless course and could not very well demand his twelve pounds back from Pad Tomelty. Pad would be sure to let everyone, including Brigit, know that the grieve's lad had no stomach for adventure, had shown himself to be a coward. Rather than lose face Matt continued to smuggle whisky from the Tomelty stills. In fact he only felt secure when he was buried in Eardmore or crouched in a hole in the hillside by Pad's side, choking on the reek of peat smoke and watching the distillation drip-drip-drip from the lip of the worm. On the open roads, though, with kegs in a cart or flagons clinking in his saddle-packs Matt was as edgy as a cat in a kennel.

Mostly Matt moved his quotas of whisky by night and, where possible, discovered unused paths to carry him unseen to the backs of the Ramshead or the Bull or down to Rowan Hill. In summer he forded the Lightwater rather than risk appearing on one of the bridges, locations where Excisemen might be lying in wait. Gone was the carefree conceit that had drawn Matt into Tomelty's circle. He had finally begun to question his ability to cope with the stresses of being a whisky smuggler, to view the tedious existence of an estate manager as, perhaps, a more worthwhile end.

Matt Sinclair was the key to the riddle of what exactly took place at Kennart on a blustery night in mid-September in the year of 1813. No enquiring genius emerged to put all the pieces together and not constables nor King's men nor even the Sheriff of the county acquired a sufficiency of facts to do more than pick at the truth. James Simpson Moodie might have supplied a fat portion of fact and Anna Sinclair another, and the two, together with Elspeth, might have concluded that Matt was not only key but victim. But there was to be no family conference afterwards, no meeting of the three, and motives suggested in the Sheriff's Report were vague, flavoured with hints of political plotting.

The wind from the hill was gusting strong. Oaks shook and elms creaked. Pines in the plantation set up a massive brushy clash, which contrasted with the round howling of the wind across the open moorland and its scything hiss over the pastures of the Strath. Matt picked up the loaded pony in cloud-heavy twilight. The walk up from Ottershaw into the teeth of the wind had wearied even him and he was glad to rest for a quarter of an hour in the old black barn in Eardmore where Pad Tomelty waited.

Pad was considerate enough to have brought him a dish of boiled mutton and a half-loaf of bread. Matt ate hungrily, washed down the food with mouthfuls of whisky then hoisted himself into the saddle which was strapped to the pony's back. In swollen saddle-packs were two dozen blue glass flagons, each of which contained a quart of new-run whisky, the bottles swaddled in sackcloth and padded out with heather to prevent breakage.

The pony was large for the breed, arch-necked and sturdy. In daylight it might have trotted down the moor ridge in an hour and been at Kennart in two, even with a load. But night travel was hazardous and Matt would not risk the broken track that descended steeply over the shoulder of Drumglass. He would go round by Rossbridge, turn down off the moor miles east of Harlwood, cross the Endrick and then the Lightwater behind Balfron and come at Rowan Hill, about the hour of eleven, through the coppice on the long, long route; nobody would expect him to fling so far out from the stills. Besides, the tracks were flatter, less exposed to the half-gale that belled across the Lennox and showed no sign of abating before morning.

Pad Tomelty opened the barn door. Holding on his bonnet with one hand, back pressed against the boards, Pad shouted, "Tread wi' care, Matt."

"I will. I will."

"If it blows too fierce, lie up."

"I'm goin' by Rossbridge."

"Aye, then there's Miller's place t' shelter in, if needs be."

"I know it. Can he be trusted?"

"He can," said Pad. "Listen t' me, son, ye can bide here if the weather has ye worrit."

"The Cunninghams expect me tonight."

"They can wait."

"Nah, nah! On a night as wild as this," Matt shouted, "all the bloody Excisemen'll be indoors."

Pad laughed, shook his head and slapped the pony's rump.

Matt trotted out of the shelter of the barn into a crosswind which, blowing up to a gust, made the pony sway for a moment until it found balance and, tucking down its head, clopped forward steadily.

Eardmore was soon behind. Matt forged on, stooped over the feathery mane to offer less resistance to the flooding air. He was warm enough, for the wind had no bite yet. His belly was snug with the supper Pad had provided. He settled to the ride attentively, though the pony knew the road better than he did and, even packed, was sure-footed and game.

As he drove over the Fintry road the freshness of an unmown clover-lay tickled Matt's nostrils and the vicinity of Harlwood brought him the fermentations of dung and compost strew and a corn harvest half taken in. Smoke from crofts and steadings, the whiff of a hog-sty, a multitude of smells woven in the wind told Matt where he was, while the pony picked tirelessly on, wheeling nearer and nearer to Kennart.

Matt was neither fearful nor apprehensive. He sincerely believed that the riding officers of the revenue, Georgie's appointed bully-boys, were weaklings who would not brave strong weather for the sake of duty. Nor had he Anna's infidelity on his mind, the frustration which thoughts of his wife with the laird engendered.

Anna had been informed that he would be gone all night. She demanded no explanation. Casually he had told her that he would be making a drop to the Cunninghams. She did not ask why he would not return to Pine Cottage, did not care a fig. If Anna chose to spend the night in Bontine's bed it was no skin off Matt's nose. He would find solace and satisfaction in one of the hay-sheds by the backs of Balnesmoor, with Brigit. Yet he had lost the hunger for Brigit that once had been so keen. He did not wish to be shut up in a cottage somewhere with her; nor did he wish to escape into some travelling future. Matt had arrived at a static state, neither free nor bound. He wanted nothing much but a long rest after the job was done. If Matt had been a shade more nervous, if the wind from the hill had not blunted his caution, he might have spotted the rider who had dogged his tracks all the way from Eardmore.

The wiry, nimble figure was seated on a pony no less sturdy than Matt's own beast but the stranger's mount was free of pack or saddle-bags. Quicker to the rein, it stepped and halted, tripped on swiftly again in response to the touch of the rider, a bearded man who had lain in wait in the rocks above Eardmore since sunset. Not until it became certain that Sinclair could be bound for no other place than Kennart did the stranger break off his shadowy pursuit. He galloped down a dip below the coppice and, reining again, rolled slow and quiet through the mill hamlet, past the darkened mill buildings and the sleeping cottages and up the path to the Cunninghams' shop.

Hugh Fitter from Kilsyth was not the only stranger in the vicinity of Rowan Hill that gusty night, however.

Crouched in the bracken by a straggle of hawthorn just above the shop was the gauger from Drymen, Kerr Johnston by name. Johnston was heart-in-the-mouth nervous. After all he was only a humble gauger, a measurer and calculator, who had never before been on a raid with the riding officers. He was not, strictly, riding with them now. He had no horse or garron and had been instructed to leg it down to Kennart in advance of the mounted patrol and put himself in a scouting position before sun set behind Ben Lomond. He had been warned that if he gave the show away, if the Cunninghams twigged to his presence, it would be as much as his job was worth. Soon after dark six mounted men arrived in a glade a quarter of a mile away, protected by the hedgehog hump of the hill. By then Johnston was cold, tense and hungry. He cursed the sender of the anonymous letter which had been slipped beneath his door very early that morning, damned to hell the vindictive swine who had peached on George and Trina Cunningham in terms too detailed to ignore.

At first Johnston had considered ignoring the tip, burning the single sheet of paper on the fire. But he feared that his superiors might learn of his neglect of duty and dismiss him from service. He raged and wrestled with his conscience for an hour or so and then hurried out to the livery stable at Buchanan, hired a fast horse and able young rider, at government expense, and despatched the original letter and a missive of his own devising, under seal, to Gartmore where two revenue officers were currently billeted.

Five hours later, about one o'clock, Ronald Cecil ambled into Drymen, posted his horse outside the gauger's house and went inside. Though Cecil was English, there was nothing unusual in his appearance to rouse suspicion in the minds of those who were sympathetic to smugglers or in the pay of Padric Tomelty. Within the gauger's house, however, the plan was made, Johnston's part in it made clear. If the letter was not a simple mischief, and it did not seem so, then a delivery of hill-run whisky would be made after dark to the Cunninghams of Kennart. A raid would catch the culprits, buyers and sellers, red-handed.

Ronald Cecil and his cohort, John Barnes, had borrowed four experienced militiamen from the Duke's brigade and had them in readiness, eager and armed to the teeth, in a deep wood behind Buchanan. They would advance stealthily to a glade by Howe's gate close to Kennart to await Johnston's signal that the smugglers had arrived, then the six mounted men would move in upon the shop and net the transgressors. In Cecil's opinion there would be no blood shed.

So Hugh Fitter came on the unencumbered pony, tethered it off the path some distance below the shop and crept up to the cottage with all the stealth of a hunting stoat. Expecting at least one pack-animal, Johnston did not notice the arrival of the man from Kilsyth. It would have been better for Matt if he had, if the alarm had been raised prematurely.

It would have been better for the Cunninghams too, for before Matt rode up to the cottage some twenty minutes later George and Trina Cunningham were dead.

Betty bathed the morsel about half-past nine, lifted her like a troutling from the wooden tub before the nursery fire and dabbed her dry with a huge white towel. The baby, who had already acquired the name by which she would be baptised, Mary Jean, seemed quite at home in the warm water but did object to being coddled in a towel. She set up a girn of quite blistering temper and did not shush until she had been wrapped in her napkin and dressed in her fleece bodice and clean night-robes. Already, so Betty said, the wee thing had learned that the towel ordeal would be followed by a feed which was why she fell quiet and patient in the servant's arms and graciously permitted herself to be carried downstairs to the drawing-room where Papa and Mama waited.

Perhaps it was a cottar mentality that led James to instigate the odd little ceremony of the late-night feed. Elspeth did not object to it, since she had none of that sort of snobbishness in her either and did not believe that babies should, as a matter of course, be kept strictly out of sight or that the tending of them was something of which a mother should be ashamed. She suspected, however, that James enjoyed the paradox which the drawing-room's elegance made of the business of breast-feeding. The 'picture' must be pretty. Elspeth must wear her hand-stitched gown with an unfashionable separation of jacket and petticoat, wisps of sleeves and a drape which, for modesty's sake, she held across her breast while baby sucked. James also primped himself up; full evening dress, olive-suited, a white marcella waistcoat, even buckled shoes which he generally considered effeminate. While Elspeth fed the infant James would stand at a respectful distance, sipping coffee, head cocked, a smile hovering at the corner of his lips, chuckling now and then when the baby's greedy gurglings became too impolite to ignore.

The establishment of a nursery had been James's idea. He had executed it with his usual speed and thoroughness. The nursery had been Mother Moodie's sick-room. Only three days after Mother Moodie's departure, her tiny namesake was installed there. The room held ghosts, however, given substance by unpleasant connotations. It also separated Elspeth from her baby, though that was the style in 'society' and Betty was a tender and careful nurse. Wary of her husband, particularly in the days following his mother's death, Elspeth let him have his way, negotiating not at all for her wishes, concerned to draw a line only when the baby's comfort and welfare were concerned.

But James was a doting father; almost too doting. Elspeth could not rid herself of the feeling that James wanted the baby for himself, to claim and possess it. Certainly, he was in and out of the nursery all day long, often while she was having a nap in her bedroom or occupied with minor chores of housekeeping. He would 'walk' the baby, quite safely but in a manner that was alien to a majority of gentlemen, hugging her lightly, murmuring to her in confidential tones, showing her this and that object about Moss House, promising her that, come the warm days, he would show her his horses and his baa-lambs and the splish-splash wheel of his mill.

Little Mary Jean was seldom cross when she was in James's arms. This rankled with Elspeth, gave her prickles of envy and apprehension. A child so young required mothering, not fathering, but she put up no objection, seeing in James's attachment to the baby a relief from the grief of his mother's illness and passing.

Mother Moodie's chair was the only one of her possessions that James retained. Clothing, personal things, were parcelled tidily and taken away – taken where, Elspeth did not enquire – but the throne-like chair was carried into James's private study and installed there, though it seemed too large and looming for the small chamber.

James had written to his sisters, double-duty letters informing them of the death of their mother and the birth of his daughter. Neither sister had so far replied. In due course, perhaps, some formal little note would be brought by the post to Moss House, a gift of linen or a trinket for the new baby, but the Moodie sisters had fashioned their own lives and had long ago shoved James and Balnesmoor behind them. If James was hurt by their neglect he gave no indication of it. To Elspeth he seemed at peace with the world. He referred to little Mary Jane as 'my daughter' and promised a christening celebration that would shake the Lennox with its lavishness.

When not in the baby's company, however, James was indrawn and silent. He spent hour upon hour in the study. His trips away from home had been curtailed by circumstances but he seemed in no hurry to put on the mantle of management again. He did not even ride out to supervise the transfer of the Ottershaw Cheviots to Dyers' Dyke, left it entirely to the Macfarlanes. He had been gone from Moss House only once, for a half-day, and had taken the horse and not the cabriolet.

Gilbert Bontine had paid a call only a few days after Mother Moodie's burial, the arrangement having been made outside the kirk. Elspeth's question as to the purpose of Gilbert's visit was met with a vague reply, delivered with a touch of wry amusement. Gibbie had gone into banking, it seemed, and was unashamedly bearding customers for the Falkirk Farmers'.

"Will you give him your business, James?"

"Some of it, perhaps."

Anna had not come near Moss House, nor had she written to her sister or made any other attempt at communication. Elspeth wondered if Anna was jealous of her state of motherhood or if, for some other reason, Anna was deliberately slighting her. Of Miss Blaven she had seen nothing, heard nothing for months. She did not anticipate that she would ever have other than accidental meetings, if that, with the spinster again.

Moss House had become the hub of her existence, brought about with her daughter's arrival. She would probably bear no more children. Mary Jean must fulfil for her all that a family should be and for twenty or thirty years she would live the life that James arranged for her, without folly or adventure, and only the unfurling of her daughter's destiny to satisfy and console her. Perhaps it would be enough. Perhaps that was all there was. At least she had all the creature comforts that money could buy, a security and respect many a young wife would envy.

And then it all changed, changed with dramatic and devastating suddenness, as it had on the night of the great rain-storm which had drowned the Nettleburn and induced her mother's fatal illness.

Elspeth would never forget the moment, precisely recorded by the striking of the little Turkish clock on the mantelshelf.

Eleven.

James turned his head at the sound. She saw her husband's profile, blunt and swarthy, and then, through a narrow gap in the drapes that covered the long windows, that queer, smudged glow in the middle of nowhere.

Hedges shut off the front of Moss Road. Trees were posted adjacent to the gate. Elms marched down the line of the Kennart road; yet there was a sight-line, an unsuspected optical deception which revealed, even in the autumnal season, the lift of the hill above Kennart.

Mary Jean nuzzled against her breast, tugging on the nipple. Elizabeth could not leap to her feet.

"James?"

The Turkish clock was still chiming.

"James, what's that in the sky?"

The smudge of reddish-yellow light waxed and waned. Across it, without dimension, danced the shapes of leaves flung about by the wind.

"Hm?"

"There, across the fields." Elspeth nodded.

She had shifted position on the chair, instinctively tightening her grip on the baby, drawing her forearm across her little legs.

"Do you see it?"

She glanced from the gap in the curtains and for a split second read in James's expression a mingling of guilt and foreknowledge that reason could not later erase. It was as if he had been expecting something to happen. He strode to the window, flung back the curtain and, with arms raised, pressed against the glass.

"Good God, it's Kennart!" he said. "Kennart's burnin'. Someone's fired the mill."

Matt reined the pack-pony and straightened in the saddle. His back was stiff, his thigh muscles ached and he was no longer relaxed. In the window of the Cunninghams' cottage a lantern showed its light, an agreed sign that all was well, that George was ready to unload the flagons and stow them safe away. Matt respected the Glaswegians, though he did not much like the fat woman. They were an experienced pair, though, and clever at manipulating the laws, had licences and permissions to deter the gaugers if they were pushed to an inspection.

Since that day in March there had been no reports of King's Officers in the neighbourhood. Pad had told him that two of the devils were billeted in Gartmore to raid down into the forests around Loch Ard, breaking the small still trade that flourished in the hinterland. Riding for the revenue was work only for ruthless, devoted young men, those with no affection for impoverished brethren or love for the native drink itself, a natural employment, in other words, for Englishmen anxious to rise in esteem. Pad promised Matt that Kennart, Balnesmoor and Ottershaw would be safe from serious harassment since the parish was protected by the good names of Mr Moodie and Sir Randall Bontine.

Pad Tomelty's assurances notwithstanding, Matt stood his ground for two or three minutes on the crown of the path. He was aware of every sound, every stir in the brush, but the air was alive with noise and movement since the wind found a funnel in the narrow glen.

Matt took a deep breath, pinned his attention on the dab of colour that was the lantern and gave the pony a touch of the heel.

Wooden shutters which closed off the shop rattled on rope hinges. Matt brought the pony to the lee of the shop and dismounted. He ached so much that at first his legs would hardly support him. He stamped his feet to restore circulation before tying the pony to a hitching-post. The animal sagged its head in search of a few leaves of grass or weed-bite along the bottom of the wall. Matt rubbed his palm affectionately along its shoulder; the wee beast had done well and made fine time considering the weather.

Flexing his back muscles, Matt walked around the shop frontage to the cottage's low-lintelled doorway which was barred by a pine-board door.

Again Matt paused. Still stiff, he whirled his arms about his head in a windmill, grunting as the tensions eased.

Beneath the door light showed.

Matt knocked, waited, then thumbed down the latch and pushed the door inward. It was surprising that Cunningham had not come out to greet him. George Cunningham was usually eager and alert. Perhaps the windy din of the night had muffled the sounds of his arrival.

"Mister Cunningham."

Stooping, Matt entered the cottage.

"George? Are ye there, man? I've brought the –"

If Matt had been of short stature, Pad's size, say, the cheese-wire would have snapped clean about his gullet, he would have found his breath cut off and been strangled where he stood. But Matt's breadth of shoulder and his posture deceived the attacker. The wire loop snapped on his shoulder, ruching up his jacket, and became embedded in his collar flap.

Instinctively Matt reared up to full height. He thumped his forehead on the beam at the kitchen entrance but hardly felt the blow. He stared into the deserted kitchen, lit by firelight and lantern-glow. A stool had been overturned, crockery smashed, a gin bottle spun languidly on the hearthstone.

He bellowed, "GEORGE."

Somehow he knew that his assailant was not George Cunningham. Cunningham was too bulky. The impression was of a wiry man, somebody small and nimble. He must have been positioned behind the buckram curtain which closed off the lead to the shop.

Matt felt the man's hand tear at his cheek and jaw, striving to jerk his head back and work the wire under his chin. Matt buried his chin in his chest and in that same instant pitched himself backwards with all his might. Caught by surprise, the attacker rammed into the post of the shop lead and had the breath knocked out of him. He released his grip on the handle of the cheese-cutter, snatched at the buckram curtain, fell through it and was lost for a moment behind its crackling folds.

The tiny hallway confined the struggle. It was like fighting in a coffin and Matt, terrified and furious, plunged about like a bull, flailing his fists into the bulging curtain. The man came out low, head low. He butted Matt in the pit of the stomach, winding him in turn and charged him backwards into the kitchen.

"GEORGE. GEORGE."

Trina Cunningham lay on the far side of the hearth. She was clad only in an undershift, stockings wrinkled like snakeskins about her thick calves, her mountainous stomach protruding obscenely. Her head was craked round, eyes popping, tongue, black, lolling from a gaping mouth. Attentive even in death, George was close beside her, stuffed into the corner, head and arms hanging over the rush-bottomed chair with which he had been propped up.

Piled about the pair, like a martyr's pyre, were sugar sacks and baskets, sheaves of dry corn all drenched in oils and, by the stink, in spirits. Blankets and the mattress from the half-loft had been hauled down and added to the pile and it was into this snarl that Matt toppled, with the murderer on top of him.

Matt did not see the knife. He hardly felt the dart of the little vee-shaped blade across his cheek, nor the stab of it into the muscle below his collar-bone. He was astonished when blood flecked the mattress, flung out by the violence of his motion. Pumped up by fear, the little man was no match for Matt's power. When the hand darted in again Matt caught it with his right hand. The knife, a short, two-edged dirk, flickered close to his right eye and he flinched his head back from it, fearing for his sight. But now he could see his attacker's face and recognised the stranger, Fitter, whom he had encountered at Eardmore. Forked beard and sallow complexion were unmistakable.

Tomelty, Pad Tomelty had sent this hireling to destroy the Cunninghams, to destroy him. Tomelty must be behind it. Realisation burst like gunpowder in Matt's brain. He roared aloud with the pain of it. No longer inhibited by fear, his rage was raw and red. He had been betrayed into a violent plot, into murder. He would make Tomelty pay for his twelve-pound treachery.

Sensing the change in his victim's mood, Fitter scrambled to escape. Desperately he lashed out. His forearm struck Matt on the bridge of the nose, dazzling the forester with pain. But Matt continued to cling to the knife-arm. He used it to drag himself to his feet and, in the same movement, to draw Fitter down into the mattress. When he was upright, Matt twisted and wrenched at the man's arm. He heard Fitter cry out in agony. With all his force he hurled the murderer across the kitchen.

The knife skittered and pattered loose over the floor. Fitter rebounded from the far wall, close to the window. Sinclair was too physically strong for him. He had failed to catch the young man by surprise as he had done Cunningham and the woman. Sinclair would not buckle, would not give him another opportunity to strike. Fitter groped for the lantern on the window ledge and flung it at Matt's head.

Matt fended off the lantern. He did not see where it fell. It thudded into the straw pile close to Trina Cunningham's body. The candle bobbed out. Thin petals of flame caught the edge of a frayed sheet, puffed into pale blue scallops and burrowed with a fierce little crackle into the strew. The warmth of the hearth-fire had partly evaporated the fuels which Fitter had sprinkled on the pyre. Flame spread in a series of soft sighs. Matt did not notice the rapidity with which the stuff ignited. He was intent upon nailing Fitter.

The man had retrieved the knife from the floor. It was a tool, not a butcher's blade. He had not intended to use it as a weapon. He had been instructed to feign an accident. Fire had been his weapon, fire and the cheese-cutter which, together, would leave no positive traces of foul play. He had, however, underestimated Sinclair. Now he must leave the job only two-thirds done. Fitter crabbed towards the door. Matt lunged at him. Fitter parried at him with the dirk. Ignoring the danger, Matt caught his arm again, swung him violently against the wall and fell against him, fingers fastened about the bearded jaw. Fitter pumped the blade into Matt's flesh but the knife was too short to do stopping damage. Matt's fingers tightened, his thumbs found the windpipe.

Specks of red and black whirled in the air. A shimmering veil of flame outlined Sinclair's head. From the corner came a loud crack as a thin glass bottle shattered in the heat and spread more oil into the blaze. Smoke sucked over the hearthstone into the draught of the chimney, followed by ribbons of red flame. Fitter struggled frantically to break Matt's grip. He drove his knees into the young man's stomach and Matt slackened for a moment. Choking, Fitter dropped and butted Matt in the mouth with the crown of his head.

Matt staggered back, dazed. Blood oozed from the puncture wounds in his leg but he was not seriously weakened and had no thought for the injury. He wanted to wring from Fitter due confession, to have Fitter name his master.

The door delayed him. Fitter could not hold against Matt's strength for long, however. Knee braced against the post, both fists on the handle, Matt strained and hauled until Fitter, on the outside, was forced to yield. He let go suddenly. The door flew inwards and Matt again went sprawling.

On his left the kitchen was a mass of flames and coiling smoke. Air from the open door fanned the blaze. Though Matt could not see it, the chair against which George Cunningham was propped was burning and the shopkeeper's clothing smoked and smouldered, his features turning black. Fat Trina's arm wore a bracelet of fire and her shift was laced with flame. Beams and boards had ignited and as soon as the gusting wind found openings, cottage and adjoining shop would bellow swiftly into a furnace of heat and light. Nothing much would be left upon which to build a tale, truth would be lost with the evidence. Beneath his anger, Matt realised it. He thrust himself out of the cottage into the night and set off down the path to Kennart in pursuit of the man named Fitter.

Four minutes had elapsed since Matt had brought the pony to the lee of the shop. Unknown to the young forester, Mr Johnston, the gauger from Drymen, had been most active in that time. Identifying the pack-pony and guessing at the contents of the saddle-sacks, the gauger had crawled out of his hawthorn hide and had set off like a rabbit down the back side of Rowan Hill to rouse the riding officers.

There had been talk of flares and signals but in the end Revenue Officer Cecil had decided that a combination of stealth and speed would trap the smugglers effectively. He had split his force. Barnes and one militiaman would gallop down to the Kennart road to stopper that avenue of escape while he led the others into the narrow glen. Cecil had calculated that it would take Johnston five minutes to raise the alarm, that three or four would see the horsemen out of hiding and into sight of the shop. No cargo could be unloaded in less time than that, particularly as the smugglers would not feel pressed.

Johnston had his nose towards the glade. Weaving among the trees, he did not see the fire break out. Cecil and Barnes, however, caught the first hint of the conflagration which would reduce the Cunninghams' property to greasy mounds of char and debris; a shower of sparks, sucked through the cottage chimney, soared high over Rowan Hill.

"What the devil!" Barnes shrilled.

"Looks like the lum's awa'," said one of the militia

"Chimney be hanged," Cecil snapped. "That's a roof at least."

Urged on by his superior, Barnes sawed his horse round and, with one of the militiamen behind him, set off at a gallop for the curve of the hill. Cecil wasted no time in leading his group past the alderbrake and on to the sheep pad down which Johnston would appear. Gauger and riding officer met some hundred yards from the base of the hill.

"How long have they been there?" Cecil shouted.

Rasping for breath, Johnston got out, "Only – only minutes, Mister Cecil, sir."

"How many of them are there?"

"One man an' a pack-animal."

"There must be others, hidden somewhere."

"Only – only the one, sir."

"Did you recognise him?"

"No' – no' verra well."

A plume of flame, decorated with sparks, curved high over the hill-top ahead of the revenue officer and his men. Cecil opened his mouth to question Johnston further but the gauger had clutched his side and fallen into a sitting position on the bank. The situation had begun to twist out of the shape that Cecil had intended for it and he was suddenly possessed by a fear that the smugglers had somehow outwitted him. With a wave of his arm and a wild shout he led the horsemen on, as fast as they dared ride, into the ramp that sloped up to the tight-headed little glen.

He was no longer steering blind for the burning cottage gave enough light to guide him through thorn bushes and willow shrubs. But he had seen something else, something that caused him to spur his horse with reckless urgency; the shape of a man running hard down the path towards Kennart.

Cecil should have ridden on in pursuit of the fugitive but pity constrained him to check on the pad outside the cottage. The building was well alight and, even as he watched, fire slithered and expanded deep within the recesses of the shop. Through warped shutters he could see its suffusion, hear the slump and hiss of comestibles turning to flame. Sight of the pony roped fast to the hitching-post by the gable arrested the revenue officer. He would curse that few seconds' delay. But the pack-animal was kicking and bucking and in sheer terror and he could not quite trust the local men not to leave it to suffocate, to ride willy-nilly after him.

With his cutlass he gestured.

"You, be quick. Free the beast before the wall falls. I need the evidence on its back."

The militiamen were brave and two ducked against the waves of heat that emanated from the cottage and were not an instant too soon in pulling the pony away. The shop, being built mostly of wood, broke and collapsed inward without warning.

Embers and hot fragments wafted across the riders, making their mounts too unmanageable. The militiaman who had charge of the two vacant saddles found himself with his hands full. Being unable to do much else, he permitted the animals to prance out of range of the spume from the blaze into the turn of the Kennart track. Several minutes of chaos ensued. Thrusting and pulling at the reins in a vain endeavour to control his horse, Cecil could not forge a way past the refractory horses. At length the revenue officer found room and, leaning forward, gave his mount its head. But he did not charge far along the path. The night was bright with flames and the shape of the man on the path was obvious. So quick did Cecil come upon him, though, that only skilful riding, a striding jump, prevented the body being crushed by flying hoofs.

From Kennart the first of the weavers arrived, young men and eager boys, cheering for some weird reason, as if the fire were part of a festivity which old George and fat Trina had laid on to promote their wares. Visible above the ranks, slashing and bulling through them without regard for the labourers' skins, came Barnes and his companion.

For a second or two Cecil was at a loss what to do. He realised immediately that the fugitive could not have run off by the path to the mill. Barnes would hardly have let him slip unchallenged into the crowd; not even Barnes would be so foolish as to ignore a man sprinting in the wrong direction.

"Damn you, keep back. Keep away," Cecil cried. "Barnes, hold them where they stand."

Cecil cocked a leg across the saddle and slid to the ground. Holding the horse by him, he stepped across the path to the prone figure, knelt.

The officer had no need to make an examination.

The fellow was clearly beyond all mortal aid.

The deer-horn handle of a dirk protruded from his throat. Blood dappled his chest and trickled from his lips, matting the queer forked beard.

"Who is this man?" Cecil demanded.

Nobody in the gathering crowd answered him.

For nobody knew.

Until he waded into the Lightwater Matt was oblivious to the extent of his wounds. He had been driven by panic, blind panic. He had supposed that the King's Officers would thunder on to him, trample him underfoot like a rat or an otter. He did not, however, immediately surrender to a fate that seemed inevitable. He had got what he wanted from Fitter. Cold and hard as an icicle in the centre of his fear that knowledge stood.

Fitter's answer had stunned him so much that he had released his hold on the assassin and been stabbed again for his stupidity. There had not been enough fight left in Fitter, however, to check Matt's furious retaliation. In a brief, split-second scuffle, the blade had been driven through Fitter's gullet. He had slumped against Matt, gagging and vomiting. Matt had lowered him to the ground, afraid that somehow he would be pinioned by the hard, grasping hands, be held in the dying man's grasp. He was scared away from the body by the appearance of horses flying down the glen. He had turned and headed for Kennart, for cover, leaving Fitter on the path behind him.

Out of the cottages, like bees from a bank-hive, weavers and spinners emerged as Matt broke from the shrubs at the mouth of the path. Fire capped the hill. The smell of it, billowed on the wind, had been enough to rouse the mill-workers from their beds.

How many of the vanguard had spotted him, let alone recognised him, Matt could not be sure. He was not one of them, could not appeal to their sense of fellowship, put himself with them against the King's men. He veered to the right, stumbled across the lumpy road that wandered out of Kennart and straggled uphill towards Drymen. He crashed through a sparse hedge and down on to the patch of marshland that bordered the river. Hubbub, fire, shouting drove him on. Temporarily safe in the darkness of the vale, the river black against black before him, he did not hesitate, but waded down into the water and struck out for the far bank above which lay Fumarts Wood.

Initially the water revived him; then all the wounds that Fitter had inflicted began to smart, ache and leak blood. Shock caught up with Matt, making his belly gripe. Treading water in the deep channel, he let the river support him while he retched in spasms.

The Lightwater was not particularly deep or wide and Matt needed to make no effort, apart from keeping afloat, to cross it. The current dragged him twenty or thirty yards downstream and nudged him against a barrow of silt and mud. He crawled up it on all fours, still retching, grabbed the roots that overhung it and pulled himself on to dry ground again. Drained, he could do nothing but rest under the protection of the bank, while the fire-glow spouted volcanically from the hill and scribbled its reflections upon the water at his feet.

He had killed a man. In fight or not, he had murdered a man. Matt felt no shame, no remorse, only hopeless despair. He would be hunted down and caught. Tried, convicted, hanged. He would bring shame to his father and mother, to his brother Sandy and his sisters. He could not, even now, undo it. His enemies would rejoice at his downfall, that doom which he had courted and brought upon himself and his family in a measure out of all proportion to his trivial crimes.

Anna and Bontine would laugh at his capture. They would be free of him. Once he was dead they might marry if that was what the laird desired. Pad Tomelty would not defend him, in court or out of it. Pad would have news of the burning, and be away across the hills, forsaking his stills and grain-stores, wife and children. Brigit would spurn him too; he had gone too far even for her.

But of all the folk in Ottershaw and Balnesmoor who would bless the outcome of that violent night, James Simpson Moodie was the one Matt hated most of all.

"Tell me who sent you. Tell me or I'll throttle you."

Fitter's gesture of malice was the confession itself.

He grinned. "Weaver Moodie sent me."

"Moodie? Who paid your bloody fee?"

"Weaver Moodie."

"But why? For what purpose?"

"To have you killed, all three."

"To murder me too?"

"Aye, you most of all."

There no longer had to be logical reason for Jamie Moodie's behaviour. Matt had a glimmer of motive behind the weaver's plotting, a glimpse of the subtle stuff of guilt and jealousy of which he grew more certain as he cowered under the river-bank.

Across the Lightwater he could make out the King's Officers as they trotted across the road, riding hither and thither. One had a lighted lantern on a pole, another a pine torch. About them milled the weavers, prying and laughing, crying back news to the shawl-wrapped women and children who stood about the cottage doors.

Matt stirred himself. He hoisted his chest over the bank and rolled himself into the weeds.

Crouched, he scuttled forward into the shelter of the trees and started at a run through the wood, not in search of sanctuary or escape but towards the turnpike, bound for the head of the village and Moss House.

TEN

The Lost Man

Long after midnight Elspeth was not only awake but up and about. She had seen to it that little Mary Jean was settled in her cot and Betty installed in the nursery to meet with any crises which might arise, then had gone into the echoing upstairs parlour which was seldom used for any purpose at all and had joined Tolland at the window there.

Steward and mistress were not the only ones who looked from Balnesmoor upon the fire and smoke that wreathed the crown of Rowan Hill below. Servants huddled in the gardens and, in the loft of the coach-house, grooms and stable hands crowded like pigeons. Bold Luke McWilliams had begged the use of a horse to ride down after his master to see what was truly amiss at Kennart but his request had been sternly refused. If the presence of servants was required by Mr Moodie then Mr Moodie would find a means of sending for them.

It did not take Tolland and Elspeth long to conclude that it was not the mill that had caught alight and that the fire did not seem to have spread from its original source, though whether it had been contained by reason of bucket-labour or simply the whim of the wind they could not, from such a distance, deduce. Unusual sounds floated up from the valley. Faint shouts and cries added to the half-heard, half-imagined crackle of the fire itself. What it meant, the occupants of Moss House would learn only when the master returned. By a quarter to midnight there was little left to see; just a dust of embers in the darkness which flickered slightly as the big gusts tumbled over them.

Tolland chased the servants to their beds, locked all doors and windows, saving the kitchen door which he left unbarred against Mr Moodie's return. Duty done, the steward brewed tea in one of the kitchen pots, toasted and hot-buttered slices from the day's loaf at the grid of the oven and, relaxing formality, asked Mistress Elspeth if she would care to join him for a late bite of supper. He had judged, rightly, that the young woman was agitated and might be glad not only of refreshment but of company.

Elspeth followed Tom Tolland downstairs into the servants' domain. She never lingered here since her presence intimidated the girls. But she made her tours of inspection with a certain wistfulness, attracted to the long, low-beamed kitchen and its cosy warmth. Perhaps she would have been happier as James's housekeeper. Such an arrangement would have saved him embarrassment, the deceit necessary to ensure that she did not share his bed or any sort of intimacy.

Seated at the baking-table, Elspeth and Tolland speculated on what might have caused the fire and which particular dwelling had been destroyed. They concluded, again, that it might be the new shop, the store managed by the Cunninghams. Tolland waxed eloquent on the disservice they had done to Kennart by bringing drink and credit to the villagers. He did not so far forget his place, however, as to criticise Mr Moodie for permitting the Glaswegians to settle in the mill-hamlet and kept to himself much of the gossip that had come his way concerning the pernicious influence that the Cunninghams seemed to have over his master. Elspeth felt her restlessness begin to wane. Perhaps, she thought, she soon would go upstairs to bed, leaving James to find his own way in or, more probably, for Tolland to sit up until the master returned.

Neither of them caught the series of noises that, on a calmer night, would have had Tolland reaching for the heavy-handled broom. But the wind was loud off the Orrals and boomed about the back of Moss House as well as the front. It confused even the dogs in the stable yard so that they lifted their heads from their forepaws and frowned but did not bark an alarm.

The crash of the door from the kitchen yard brought Tolland to his feet. He had taken two steps towards the corner where the broom was kept when the inner door, into the kitchen itself, flew open and Matt Sinclair stumbled across the threshold. The young man was barely recognisable. Soaked to the skin, smeared with blood and close to collapse, he reached out and braced himself against the table-top.

"Wh where is he? Where's the bastard Moodie?"

Tolland glanced at Elspeth, then moved softly, skirting Matt. But the young man was sharp and wary.

"Stand still, you, where I can see ye."

Tolland said, "Mister Moodie's not at home."

To Elspeth Matt said, "Is that the truth?"

"Aye, Matt."

Matt leaned on his forearms on the table. Droplets of watery blood stained the stone floor.

Tolland would have moved again but Elspeth shook her head, ordering the steward to be still.

Elspeth said, "James rode out, over an hour since, to the fire at Kennart. Is that where you've been, Matt?"

"Fire? Jesus God!" Matt said. "It was no fire at the mill done this t' me. It was your damned bloody husband. He did it."

Tolland said, "We saw fire."

"The shop, the Cunninghams'."

"Matt, will you not sit down an' let me look to your hurts?" said Elspeth.

"Look me int' the jail an' up the damned gallows."

Tolland said, "Gallows? Why do you talk of gallows?"

"I kilt a man," said Matt.

Elspeth said, "Who did you kill?"

"He went for me."

"Was it a weaver?" asked Tolland. "Or a gauger, perhaps?"

"No. A stranger. Your damned husband sent him."

"James? Sent who?"

"A man. To do awa' wi' the Cunninghams – which he managed to accomplish."

"Do you mean t' tell us," said Tolland, "the Cunninghams are dead?"

"Aye. Both o' them."

"Burnt?"

"Throttled first."

"Did you –"

"Nah, nah. I was marked as third victim."

"Whose victim?" said Elspeth.

"The man's victim. Your damned husband's victim."

"Matt, will you not sit down? Please," said Elspeth.

Tolland interrupted. "Are you, by chance, bein' pursued?"

"Aye."

"Who's pursuin' you?"

"Revenue officers. Militia."

"Ah-hah!" said Tolland. "So it is smugglers' business, is it?"

"For God's sake, find me somethin' t' drink." Matt kicked out a kitchen chair and placed his knee upon it.

"Was whisky involved?" said Tolland. "A raid by the revenue officers?"

"Your damned master told the revenue officers. They were waitin' for us. For me. But he was there first. He kilt them both in cold blood before I arrived on the scene. He was hidin' in the cottage t' kill me too."

"But you –" Elspeth began.

"He had a knife."

"What weapon did you carry?" said Tolland.

"No weapon. He died by his own blade."

"You fought, did you?"

"Aye, we fought. First he tried t' throttle me then to gut me."

"Where was James? Did you not see James?"

"Moodie paid him, paid the man."

"How do you know, Matt? How can you be so sure?"

"He told me, wi' his dyin' breath he told me."

"The murderer told you?" said Tolland. "Told you he was an agent of Mister Moodie?"

"Aye."

"He was lyin'," said Tolland. "He was lyin' his way into hell."

"The murderer, Matt, what was his name?"

"Fitter."

"Fitter?"

"Aye."

"Are you certain?"

"I met him once at Eardmore. It's no' a name you'd forget."

"Was he also one of Tomelty's gang?" said Tolland.

"I know naught o' who he was, 'cept he had instruction from bloody Moodie to do what was done tonight."

Elspeth's apprehension increased. She had heard the name of Fitter once before. Some years ago, when the cattle on Dyers' Dyke had been poisoned by bad oil, it had been a packman named Fitter who had sold the jars to Peter Docherty, Peter who had taken the blame. But she recalled vividly all that Peter had told her: *I'll swear Weaver Moodie was at the back o' it. But bear that name in mind, Elspeth. Dinna forget it. Fitter.*

At the time of the enquiry, however, no proof had emerged to support Docherty's claims. Elspeth had managed to push aside the implication that James had planned and seen executed the callous slaughter of her mother's herd just to lay hands on the grazing acres of Dyers' Dyke. She could not accept that James Moodie would be so sly and ruthless. Fitter: the unusual name had floated into her life once more in connection with violence and disaster, again linked with that of her husband. Matt had no knowledge of that long-ago business and nothing to gain by deceiving her.

"Do the riding officers know *you* killed the man? Is that why you're runnin' away, Matt?"

"I was not seen t' do it. But they'll know my name by now. Your bloody bastard of a husband'll have informed them."

Tolland said quietly, "Sinclair, you must leave Moss House. It isn't safe for you to tarry here."

"First let me bind your wounds, Matt. You've lost blood an' will lose more if –"

Matt drew in a sharp breath. Since he had blurted out the truth, however garbled, the fury in him had dwindled. He had no reason, save that she was wed to Moodie, to doubt Elspeth's integrity but he had developed a great distrust of wives in general and would not give in to her at once.

"It's a horse I need," he said, "not bloody nursin'."

"I can get you a horse," said Tolland.

"Matt, why did you come to Moss House?"

"To confront Moodie. For answers from Moodie."

"It's fortunate for you, lad, Mister Moodie isn't at home," said Tolland. "You're in no fit state to challenge a man of his strength. He'd overwhelm you, lock you in the cellars and send at once for the officers."

"Aye, or kill me wi' his own hands," said Matt, "if he's man enough t' do his own filthy work, which is somethin' I doubt."

Elspeth said, "Tolland, fetch me cold water in a basin an' hot water in a bowl. Clean towels from the cupboard, an' bandages."

"I've fresh black sticking-plaster, lint an' styptic waters in the back pantry," said Tolland. "That'll staunch the flow o' blood. Do I have 'permission' to fetch the medications?"

The steward referred himself to Matt who, peering down at his thigh, saw that indeed he was losing blood.

"Aye, go an' fetch the stuff," Matt growled.

Without another word the steward left the kitchen.

"Drink," Matt said. "Give me a drink, 'Pet."

He eased himself on to the wooden chair and stretched out his legs while Elspeth poured tea from the pot on the hob and laced it with brandy from a bottle on the cook's special shelf. She held the cup out to her brother-in-law who grabbed it and swallowed the hot liquid in one gulp. She refilled the cup and put it by him and, coming round the table, knelt to examine the puncture wounds. The cloth of his breeks had been driven into them by the force of the blows and the thick fibres had aided coagulation.

"Shoulder too," said Matt.

He adopted a peculiarly lordly pose, quite unwittingly, and gave up the ferocity of manner which he had brought across the fields with him.

Tolland returned with a basin of cold water, drawn from the pump, and four clean towels under his arm.

"The servants," said Elspeth, "are they up?"

"Asleep," said Tolland. "They heard nothing, apparently."

The steward set the basin upon the table and poured hot water from the kettle into a soup bowl which he placed on the table too.

"Cut the cloth," Tolland advised.

He handed Elspeth a paring-knife with a thin sharp blade.

Matt winced as Elspeth slipped the blade along the seam of his breeks and tore it open down the length of his thigh. In the heat of the kitchen his clothing had begun to steam and his fair hair, plastered to his scalp, had half dried and stuck up in tufts like thistles. With finger and thumb, Matt peeled away the trousers. Four deep, narrow wounds marred the white thigh.

Stooping, Tolland inspected the damage.

"Lint an' sticking-plaster will seal them."

"An' bandages too," said Elspeth. "The dressin' must be thick if Matt's to ride far tonight.'

"Aye," said Tolland dryly. "A horse."

"If you bring plasters and lint," said Elspeth, "I'll fashion a dressin' while you go to the stables an' have a horse saddled an' brought round."

"The stable lads'll be curious," said Matt, "when they see me."

"They'll not see you. They'll do what I tell them," said Tolland. "Tomorrow will be time enough for us t' answer questions."

"Why are ye doin' this?" Matt addressed his sister-in-law first and then, challengingly, the steward. "What am I t' you?"

"You're Anna's husband," said Elspeth.

Matt snorted in derision.

"An' you're Lachlan Sinclair's son," said Tolland. "I'm aidin' your escape only for your father's sake. I admit, though, I'm inclined to believe you got caught in some evil not of your own makin'."

"Somethin' of your damned master's makin'."

Elspeth said, "If this man Fitter was, as you claim, a hireling for murder, Matt, then you canna take his word as Gospel truth. He might have lied, might he not, about James?"

"Whether he lied or otherwise," said Matt, "the fact of it is I kilt him. I ran for it, too. God, but the King's Officers will have my neck in a noose, since no court in the land'll show mercy to a smuggler."

"That's true," said Tolland.

"I'll need t' get out o' the Lennox," said Matt.

"Go south into England," Tolland advised. "Take a new name for yourself an' lie low."

"I will."

"What about Anna?" said Elspeth.

"Damn Anna!" said Matt. "The bloody laird can look out for her. It's how she wants it, anyway."

Impassive as usual, Tolland said, "Shall I go an' fetch a horse now?"

Elspeth's touch had soothed Matt's anger and suspicion. He did not object when she gave the steward permission to leave Moss House. If Elspeth trusted the servant then he, Matt, must do the same. It also occurred to Matt that it might not be to the Moodie family's advantage to have him brought to book, no matter how confused and despicable the crime. If the weaver was involved at all then the weaver would not want an enquiry. Better a fugitive to carry the blame away with him, to keep the mystery mysterious, than a trial which would expose everything.

Tolland went out of the kitchen, closing the door behind him.

Styptic water nipped Matt's wounds. He bit his lip against the sting. With lint, plaster and a garter of bandages the bleeding would be stopped and he would heal well enough. There were other wounds and abrasions to attend to, however. He stripped off jacket and shirt so that Elspeth might dress the injury to the flesh of his shoulder. Cuts on the neck and face were superficial, required no medication except washing.

"Matt, do you really believe that James had the Cunninghams –" Elspeth could not bring herself to complete the sentence.

"Somebody did."

"Fitter himself?"

"For what possible reason?"

"A reason unknown to us," said Elspeth.

"Nah, nah!"

"Perhaps it was Pad Tomelty sent him. You thought yourself you first saw Fitter at Eardmore."

"Why would Padric wish the Cunninghams done t' death?"

"Did they not pay their debts?"

"Aye, on the nail."

"Matt, are you certain you were an intended victim?"

Matt snorted once more. "Do ye think my wounds were inflictit by accident, eh?"

"Perhaps you disturbed Fitter in the act."

"Damn it, 'Pet, he was waitin' for me. He could have fired the cottage an' been miles awa' across the fields. He waited only t' kill me too."

"I canna believe James would condone such a thing."

"Given reason, your weaver mannie'd do anythin' that brought him gain."

"Perhaps I'm the reason."

"You?"

"He was jealous of you, Matt."

"Dinna tell me he thought we were –"

"Aye, I think he thought we were lovers."

Matt laughed. "As if you'd have truck o' that sort wi' a mere forester."

Elspeth was tempted to tell Matt that she had encouraged James's false belief. But her brother-in-law was confused enough and had enough anger in him still, perhaps, to turn on her. She did not mention her baby. She must, she supposed, share responsibility for what had happened to Matt – if James had acted against him, as Matt so vehemently claimed.

"I haven't always been Moodie's wife," said Elspeth. "Besides, you're more than a forester. You're a Sinclair. The name's respected here in Balnesmoor."

"My father's name, no' mine."

"Why did you take up with Tomelty, Matt?"

"I needed a life o' my own."

"Did Anna push you into it?"

"She was never happy. Nothin' could make her happy."

"Anna's always been – different."

Matt appeared to have no interest in discussing his wife, in finding excuse for his own behaviour in err infidelities. He put his hand on Elspeth's shoulder while she laved his wound. They were close to each other in that quiet moment in the warm kitchen but there was not the slightest physical attraction in their intimacy.

Matt said, "Did old Jamie really think we were lovers?"

"I've never known what goes on in James's mind," Elspeth answered, evasively.

"He tried to bribe me to quit Balnesmoor, once."

"But you wouldn't go?"

"By God, I'd quick enough go now," said Matt. "It's my pride or my bloody neck, 'Pet. I'm o'er young t' swing from the gallows, do ye not think?"

"Matt, be careful."

"As soon as I'm on the horse, I'll –"

The knock upon the front door of the house was hollow and echoing, like the clang of some great cracked bell in a tower.

Matt pushed Elspeth away.

"Your bloody steward! He never intendit for me –"

"Hide, Matt. Hide in Tolland's pantry. I'll get rid o' them, whoever it is."

"What if it's Moodie?"

"He would not knock so." Elspeth pushed the medications at him. "Take these. Hide them too."

She did not wait to see Matt safely into Tolland's cubby but hurried out of the kitchen and into the hallway to answer the knocking before the servants could gather their wits. Perhaps Matt had put his finger on it. She trusted Tom Tolland but had she trusted him too far? These past months it had seemed to her that Tolland's loyalty had shifted its axis; yet he was, after all, her husband's man.

She wiped her hands on her dress, tidied her hair and tried to appear unruffled.

"Who is it? Who calls at such an hour?"

"My name is Barnes, girl," came the answer. "I am an officer of the Excise in search of a fugitive from the King's justice."

The speech was delivered in a shrill English voice. Elspeth glanced behind her towards the kitchen corridor.

"Fetch your master at once, girl."

Elspeth unslotted upper and lower bolts, turned the iron handle and pulled upon the door. It opened, allowing the wind to swirl past her and extinguish the single branch of candles which lit the hallway.

The young man on the step had a lantern in one hand; in the other hand, a drawn sword.

Elspeth did not step back to admit him.

"You, fetch your master."

"I am wife to James Moodie, mistress of the house."

"Moodie? Is this Mister Moodie's dwelling, do you say?"

"It is. What do you seek here at this ungodly hour o' the night?"

"I did not realise it was Mister Moodie's house."

"Realise it now, sir!"

"Have you seen sign – you, or your domestics – of a man?"

"A man?" said Elspeth haughtily. "Do you suppose I would admit a man to my house at dead of night? My husband shall hear of this, sir, an' you'll answer for your impertinence."

Barnes was nonplussed. Behind him, at the gate of the garden, his horse pranced in the care of another mounted man.

"Did you not see the blaze at Kennart?" Barnes asked courteously.

"Ah!" said Elspeth. "You seek a fire-raiser, do you?"

"We seek a young man, Sinclair by name. You know him, do you not? Matthew Sinclair."

"He's my brother-in-law. What has he done?"

"He has done murder."

"Murder? Matt Sinclair would not –"

"He was seen and named, Mistress Moodie, by your husband."

"Did my husband send you here?" said Elspeth. "Did my husband order you to disturb his house?"

"I am instructed to ensure that Sinclair has not sought refuge in the village."

"This dwelling has been locked tight all evening."

"Your steward –"

"My steward's asleep."

If the light had been stronger Elspeth might have noticed suspicion on the face of the English officer. But it was a passing phase, a response to improbability. Stewards did not sleep through dead-of-night intrusions. The riding officer, however, did not persevere. He had fulfilled Moodie's insistent charge that someone ride at once to Moss House and ascertain that all was well there. The young woman, the wife, did not seem distressed. Barnes hesitated. He would have welcomed an invitation to enter, to search the premises, but that would have led to all manner of complications. He did not believe that a murderer and fire-raiser would be foolish enough to hide in the house of the man who was willing to name him as guilty.

"Have you not seen my husband, sir?"

"I – Indeed, I saw him at Kennart."

"Where is he now?"

"He may be still at the mill, or riding out with my companions in search of –"

"When will he return?"

Barnes was intimidated by the young wife's forceful questioning. He had done only what he had been told to do, yet felt that somehow he had obliquely offended the person who had given him the command in the first place.

James Moodie had been on the scene rapidly. He had inspected the blazing cottage, had given his smith sanction to bucket water from the lade to drench the flames, though it was far too late to save the building or any of its contents; more, he had examined the corpse on the path and had been unable to put a name to the dead man. But he had seen a familiar figure fleeing the mill-hamlet and had shouted out the name at the top of his voice to Cecil. "*I saw Sinclair runnin' away. Matthew Sinclair.*"

The crowd of weavers had been silent, not amazed by their employer's revelation. Most of them knew only too well that Sinclair was Tomelty's runner. The hue and cry had begun. The revenue officers would not rest until Sinclair had been caught or, as was often the case, slain in a fight to avoid capture. Prudently, Barnes kept all this to himself.

He answered the young wife's question with a shrug. "When he is ready to return, Madam. When the fugitive is caught."

"In that case," said Elspeth Moodie, "I'll bar the door an' will not open it again until I see my husband's face at the window."

"Your steward –"

"Good night to you, sir."

Barnes bowed and stepped back as the heavy front door slammed shut.

He swung on his heel and returned to the gate. He did not, however, immediately ride away from Moss House. Preceding the militiaman he trotted his horse some distance along the road to Harlwood and looked back into the pale-patched stables to the east of the weaver's house.

Lights were visible in the lofts but no apparent activity, nothing to suggest that Sinclair had raided the stables and had stolen himself a horse. Though he was not entirely satisfied, Barnes was too inexperienced to press an enquiry in the face of Mistress Moodie's defiance. He lingered for three or four minutes then wheeled his mount and headed for the main street where the other militiamen were rooting out the villagers and shaping a raid on Tomelty's cottage. Perhaps they would be more successful there and Sinclair, the butcher, would be laid by the heels before daylight flung the search out into the surrounding hills.

In Moss House the servants had peeped out into the corridor. Elspeth snapped at them to return to their beds at once, and assured them that they were not threatened, that the disturbances of the night did not concern them in any way at all. Betty had come out on to the staircase but Elspeth instructed the maid to return to the nursery and not to leave Mary Jean's side for the rest of the night, no matter how many King's Officers battered on the door.

Elspeth then hurried into the drawing-room and, hidden by he drapes, watched from the window as the English officer nounted and rode off towards Harlwood. She did not trust he man; nor, she realised, did she trust James. She had hidden ner shock well, too well. It seemed that James had indeed etrayed Matt, that her husband was deeply and pervertedly nvolved in the calamitous events of that night. She watched he shadows of the horsemen vanish behind ornamental hedges but did not quit her vigil just yet. In all probability they were ircling by the lane to the stables. Where was Tolland? He had been gone for so long, too long. Would he be caught red-handed leading a saddled horse to the kitchen yard?

To Elspeth's relief the horsemen reappeared after a few minutes' lapse of time, galloping back towards the village. As soon as they vanished, she ran down the corridor into the kitchen.

"Matt," she hissed. "Matt, they've gone. You can come out now."

She pushed open the door to Tolland's pantry.

There was no sign of Matt, no response to her urgent call. The half-open door into the kitchen yard told the story, told Elspeth that Matt had taken fright and fled through the garden on to the moor.

A quarter of an hour later Tolland returned, not on horseback but driving the gig. By his side was Lachlan Sinclair, the only person, Tolland believed, who cared enough to save his son and who had power to deflect, at least for a time, the cutting edge of justice.

The clatter of hoofs on the cobbles of the yard brought Hunter leaping from his bed.

"*Open. Open. I must speak with the laird.*"

Wrapped in one of the old laird's handed-down dressing-gowns, a muslin nightcap askew over one eye, Hunter appeared at the door with an ancient brass-belled blunderbuss in the crook of his arm, his heart pounding.

"Who creates such a row at this hour?"

"James Moodie. I must talk with Sir Randall."

Dunn, out of his cot, came scuttling downstairs with the speed of a ferret, not so rapidly, however, as to blow out the candle he had snatched from a bracket at the head of the stairs.

The stillness of the mansion, with Alicia, Gibbie and the children gone, magnified the voices. But this was Ottershaw, not Moss House, and none of the servants, not even Mrs Lacy, dared leave their sleeping-quarters for fear that they would be reprimanded by Sir Randall who, surely, would be disentangling himself from his bedclothes and whatever else might be in his bed.

Weaver Moodie did not dismount. He was not a neat rider, could not swing himself in and out of the saddle without effort. He preferred to remain on the back of his chestnut mare, a pliant enough beast, stationary before the kitchen door. With Dunn's arrival – and the candle, before the wind outside snuffed it out – Henry Hunter was able to identify that the rider was indeed James Moodie. He laid the blunderbuss on its stock just behind the door.

"What's amiss, sir?" he asked.

Dunn, all eyes and bare legs, crouched behind the steward as if, like a guard-dog, he might spring and affix himself to the weaver's ankle at a command.

"Where's the laird?"

"The laird's here, Mister Moodie."

Wearing nothing but a pair of trews, Randall appeared at Hunter's side.

"Fire has been raised at Kennart," James Moodie said.

"The mill?"

"No, not the mill itself. The store. It has been burnt to the ground, taking the occupants with it."

"Indeed a tragedy," said Randall. "But what, Mister Moodie, does it have to do with Ottershaw?"

"There has been a murder."

"Yes, the shopkeepers –"

"Also a stranger," said Moodie. "The murderer has been recognised."

Randall, Dunn and the steward were all motionless.

James Moodie did not await their questions.

"One of your foresters. Son of your grieve."

"Sinclair, do you mean?"

"Aye, sir, Matthew Sinclair. He's the murderer and, by the evidence, the setter of the fire."

"Matt," muttered Hunter. "God in Heaven!"

Randall shivered and rubbed his palms across his naked chest. "I see, Mister Moodie. I assure you that Sinclair is not at the house here."

"His cottage an' his father's house must be searched "

"Indeed," said Randall. "But why do you ride alone?"

"Militia, led by King's Officers, are searchin' the village, in particular the abodes o' the whisky-dealers."

"Is Tomelty involved?"

"Sinclair, it seems, was runnin' whisky for Tomelty."

"But," put in Hunter, "is it proved Matt did murder?"

"Proved enough," said Moodie.

"Was the stranger, then, a revenue officer?" said Hunter. "Are there militia dead too?"

"The shopkeeper an' his wife are burnt to death in their beds," said Moodie. "Another man, so far unknown by name, has a knife in his throat. Is that not slaughter enough for you?"

"Was Sinclair seen?" said Randall.

"Aye, sir. He was seen," said James Moodie. "Now, if you would be good enough to stir yourself an' gather your men, I would appreciate it if a party could be formed."

"Has Sinclair fled? Are we to give chase?"

"He has, it's believed, gone to ground. He canna have got far from Kennart. It's thought he came over the Lightwater an' even now might be lurkin' about your parks or buildings."

"Not if he's wise," said Hunter.

"Be quiet, Hunter," Randall snapped. "Dismount and come in for a moment, Mister Moodie. I'll dress myself and rouse men for a search, though we have little enough chance of unearthing the fellow until daylight, I think."

"No, Sir Randall. I'll not tarry. I must ride back to Balnesmoor."

"Very well, Mister Moodie."

"I trust that you'll not protect this murderous devil?"

"I have only your word that Sinclair has done murder."

"Believe me, Laird Bontine," Moodie shouted, "Sinclair is guilty of terrible crimes an' must be brought to justice."

By the laird's side, Hunter muttered, "Better we find him, sir, than the cutlasses, eh?"

"Yes," said Randall to the weaver. "I'll attend to the setting of a watch upon Pine Cottage and his father's house too. I will also muster men to scour over the parks and plantations. You may leave the search of Ottershaw to me."

"How far, Sir Randall?" James Moodie insisted.

"What?' Randall said. "Oh, to Blanefield. As high as the pass between Drumglass and Dumgoyne. To the Lightwater and the boundary of the Blane."

"I'll ride to Wrassle's farm then to give them warning."

"Would it not," said Randall, "be more appropriate to carry the dreadful news first to Lachlan Sinclair?"

"He is your grieve, sir. I leave that onerous duty to you."

"If Sinclair is apprehended –" Randall began.

The chestnut mare tripped close as Moodie moved angrily in the saddle. "He *will* be apprehended, laird. By God, he will. If he resists, he may be brought back dead."

"Yes," said Randall Bontine softly. "I understand, Mister Moodie. Sinclair must be taken – somehow."

"I'll ride by again at dawn," Moodie threatened and, slumping his thighs forward, urged the patient mare into a trot which turned him back on to the curving drive which would take him to the turnpike and Balnesmoor.

Laird, steward and boy watched the weaver out of sight.

"Hunter, close the door."

"Aye, Mister Randall."

"Dunn, be quick, lad. Dress yourself warmly and go to Pine Cottage. It's a dry night, if windy. Look carefully into the cottage, very carefully."

The boy started away towards the corridor that would take him, flying, to the stairs.

"Wait."

"Aye, Mister Randall?" said Dunn, pausing.

"What are you to do there?"

"See if the murderer's in residence."

"And what if he is, Dunn?"

"Come back here an' tell Mister Hunter."

"You must not show yourself to Matt Sinclair. Do you understand?"

'Aye, sir. I'll wait in the trees, will I no'?"

"Wait in the trees, yes, until I send for you." Randall waved the boy away. "Hurry now."

Hunter waited, agitatedly. He had sufficient experience of the new laird's ways to know that the soldier's brain would have arranged all the facts and would already have formed from them some strategy. He had a queer feeling in the pit of is stomach, foreknowledge of what the laird would expect im to do.

"Hunter, dress and go to the Sinclairs' house."

"What! Shall I tell them the truth?"

"Tell them only that Matt has escaped from a raid by King's Officers and is being sought by them."

"Not about murders or fires?"

"No, not a whisper. If Sinclair wishes to ride out with us in earch of his son, you must contrive a means of preventing it. I do not want Sinclair to leave his house. If he insists, bring im back here with you."

"What of his wife, Aileen?"

"She must be comforted through the waiting period, of course."

"The boy, Sandy, he's old enough, and sensible."

"Fetch one of the women; somebody known to her."

Hunter said, "Not Mistress Anna?"

Randall said, "No, Hunter, not her."

"What if Matt's already hidin' at the house?"

"Detain him there."

"How, laird? Lachlan'll never stand for it."

"Carry your blunderbuss. Leave it hidden by the door. If it comes to it, restrain both Sinclairs at barrel-point."

"I dinna care for this business, laird."

"I care for it even less, Hunter."

"Do you think Moodie speaks the truth an' Matt did do for the shopkeepers an' this stranger?"

"I think it's a matter of no consequence," said Randall. "If he's caught, guilty or innocent, I fear he'll swing."

"It's not what I asked you, sir."

"It's the only answer I'm ready to give. Now, go on with you, Hunter. And take care."

Lifting the blunderbuss, Henry Hunter hurried off to his closet to jump into his clothes and be about the unpleasant task of bearding the grieve at home.

Cold now, Randall went through the kitchen and up the back stairs to the bedroom where Anna waited.

Unlike Tom Tolland, who had entered her life only a handful of years before, Elspeth had known Lachlan Sinclair all her born days. In fact, he had stood as her godparent, along with

Doctor Rankellor, at a time when every hand in Balnesmoor was turned against her mother. Once she had been much in awe of the grieve of Ottershaw, not only because of his position in the community but in response to his air of authority and dependability. She had thought of him as strong but fair. It had seemed to Elspeth as if nothing would shake the rock of the grieve's character and it pained her to see him so broken by events over which he had no control. The straight back was bowed by grief, the handsome face wrinkled by weeping. He sat on a chair by the table, sobbing at the news that Matt had gone, had struck out into open country where, Sinclair groaned, he would surely be tracked down like a fox, come morning.

Tolland had been less sparing of the grieve's feelings than Henry Hunter would have been. He had expected fortitude from Lachlan. He had informed him of all the circumstances, including the allegation of murder, which had brought Matt into hiding at Moss House. But Lachlan Sinclair had not brought his wits together, had not forged some practical plan which would save his son. Lachlan Sinclair had gone to pieces.

All during the ride along the rough track that bordered the moor, with the gig leaping and swaying in the wind, Sinclair had held his head in his hands and moaned; Tom Tolland had realised that he had erred in bringing the grieve into it at all. His kindness had blown back on him. He hoped, however, that Matt would be able to draw his father to him, wring sense out of him, and was dismayed to find, on arrival in the kitchen, that Matt had fled.

"But why? Why did he run away?" Sinclair cried. "Did he know I was comin'? Is that the reason? Did he run before me? Was he shamed? Did he not think I would give him my aid?"

"The Revenue Officer at the door," said Elspeth, "put him in a fright."

"He didn't know I had gone for you, Lachlan," said Tolland. "He'd have waited, if he'd known. It's my blame. I should have told him."

"Och, Matt would put himself in jeopardy, face the swords of King's Officers rather than me. I know him. He has always been afraid of me."

Seated, rocking, the grieve clasped his hands to his chest and beat against the bone in self-punishment.

"Does he not know I love him?"

"Aye, he knows. He knows," murmured Elspeth.

"Could he not wait for me?" Sinclair parted his hands and leaned forward, fists on thighs now. He stared at the stone floor beneath his chair. "Is that Matt's blood?"

Elspeth had swabbed the kitchen floor with wet rags but had not had time to be thorough, had neglected a few spots of blood by the table.

She put her hand on Sinclair's shoulder.

"He'd torn his leg. I bound it for him."

"Did they shoot him?" Lachlan Sinclair clutched at her wrist, his eyes massive with grief. "Tell me, lass, is Matt dead."

"Man, man!" said Tolland. "We're not deceivin' you. Matt made a run for it. You can hardly blame him, with Excisemen hammerin' at the door. Come now, Lachlan, draw yourself together, I beg you."

Elspeth said, "Matt will escape them yet."

"Where will he go? Ottershaw's all he knows. He'll be lost in the world. Alone in the world." Lachlan clasped Elspeth's wrist again. "*She* did it to him, you know. *She* changed him. *She* turned him wicked."

"Matt isn't wicked," said Elspeth placatingly.

"He would never have done all this but for his marriage to that girl."

"It – it wasn't Anna's fault," said Elspeth.

"Aye, aye, it was *my* fault. I should never have allowed the marriage. She was not for our Matt. It was not made in Heaven, that bond. She isn't like my Aileen."

Elspeth felt sympathy for the grieve but also a certain annoyance at his self-pity. Lachlan Sinclair had not accepted his son because his son was not a model of himself. How that arrogance must have rankled in Matt, shaped him into the weak and indecisive husband that he had proved himself to be. Behind the failure of Matt's marriage loomed the shadow of his father's domination, stern not kindly. Love unspoken was almost as bad as no love at all.

She drew her arm away from the grieve.

"Perhaps Matt *has* gone home," she said. "I canna be sure what route he took after he left the garden here."

"What's that you say?"

"Aye," put in Tolland, who also was embarrassed by Lachlan Sinclair's collapse and, like Elspeth, wanted rid of the grieve now. "Aye, perhaps Matt's gone back to Ottershaw. Where else would he go but home?"

"He'll find no wife there."

"He'll come to you, Lachlan," said Tolland. "I should have thought o' it before."

The grieve cocked his head to one side as if he had caught a distant strain of sweet music. The wrinkled, tearful expression eased from his features. His mouth became set and proud and hard. "That's what he'd do, aye."

"If he finds no armed militia there," said Elspeth.

"He'll come to me."

"To Ottershaw," said Tolland.

"He knows I'll speak with the laird."

"Sir Randall?" said Elspeth, startled.

"The laird'll protect him."

"But –"

"I've served the Bontines boy an' man. Matt's one of mine an' I'm the Bontines' servant. It's incumbent upon the master of Ottershaw to protect his own."

"We must hope he realises it," said Tolland, as astonished as Elspeth at this curl in the grieve's thinking.

Lachlan Sinclair slapped his hands to his thighs and got to his feet. "If he *has* done wrong, Matt must pay for it. But I'll see to it, with the laird behind me, that he receives justice."

"Shall I drive you back, then?" said Tolland.

"If you'd be so good." Sinclair nodded. "I'm grateful to you, an' to yourself, Elspeth, for fetching me. I was not myself before."

"If I had known –" said Elspeth.

How much had Lachlan Sinclair grasped of the situation? Did he truly expect Randall Bontine to exercise his power to protect a young servant accused of heinous crimes, a young man, moreover, who was husband of the laird's mistress? Lachlan had stepped into not one trap but two and would surely be caught in one of them.

Elspeth glanced at Tolland who pursed his lips, shook his head. It was not wise, the steward seemed to indicate, to try to force sense upon a sensible man.

"How could you know, Elspeth?" said Sinclair, with infuriating magnanimity.

Lachlan Sinclair had not, the girl realised, seriously questioned his son's guilt, doubted the bald facts of the crime.

Elspeth allowed him to leave without conscience. She was relieved when the door closed on grieve and steward.

Lachlan Sinclair's moral blindness presented her with a miniature of her own failing, of her husband's culpability. Doubt boiled within her. She needed to be alone to do what had to be done. She watched the gig jounce on to hard track behind tossing hedges.

When it had gone, Elspeth walked resolutely into Tolland's pantry and took down the big iron ring on which the steward kept all the household keys. She found a candle and lit it, stuck it firmly in a holder and went out of the kitchen and across the corridor to the study in which James spent so much of his time in brooding retreat.

The door which protected the room's secrets naturally was locked. Patiently Elspeth fitted a key into the lock, a second, third and fourth; a fifth at last engaged and, when she turned it, allowed the door to swing inward upon its hinges. Extending the candle before her Elspeth went into the room.

It was furnished as she remembered it from the two or three occasions upon which she had been permitted, in James's presence, to cross the threshold. She had not been curious about these matters of business and the profound thoughts which occupied her husband in his privacy. But she was curious now. Instinct prompted her to hope that James would have some record, some letter or paper scrap which might validate her belief that he was capable of hiring a murderer, that, in some obscure way, he was only protecting her and her baby from harm.

Desk, chair, decanters, a bare mantelshelf over a dead fire, an oil lamp, a silver dish with flints, a row of ledgers on the board floor, and a chest to hold them straight; above the chest was a window neuk draped with a curtain. She knew where the key would be, on James's watch-fob. She placed the candle-holder on the desk and returned to the kitchen and, in the cupboard where utensils were kept, found a stout skewer. She took it back to the study, closed the door and knelt again before the chest.

Bound with bands of iron, pimpled with rust, the chest seemed stout and secure. But its lock was a small, brass, heart-shaped affair. Without compunction Elspeth stabbed the skewer into the aperture, leaned her weight upon it, boring and levering until the casing snapped and wood splintered. With the point, she worked the lock loose, thumbed the catches and lifted the lid.

No fat bundles of letters, no tangible trophies of the past met her gaze, only a sad little bag of dried lavender which lay like the corpse of a vole on top of a couple of ledgers. Elspeth was disappointed. In worn roan bindings, the books seemed no different from those on the floor. She put the lavender bag to one side, lifted out the volumes and carried them to the desk. She lit the lamp from the candle and in its circle of mellow light opened the uppermost ledger

James's script; in places it was hasty and spidery, in others careful and formal. The ink had faded. Elspeth had to peer to decipher the words. It was, she realised, a logbook of sales made twenty years ago, in the days when the Moodies had conducted trade from the cramped cottage in the Bonnywell, opposite the manse. Sums paid in recompense for cloth pieces seemed pitifully meagre, profit measured in pennies not pounds. Still disappointed, she flicked over the pages at random.

It was in the fold of pages dated 1791 that Elspeth discovered the first in a series of inserted leaves, letters and notes. The sheet was innocuous enough, a page trimmed from the Balnesmoor kirk records: *November, 11th Day Thereof, 1791. To pay for a coffin for a poor starved woman, Who was a stranger . . . 6s 8d.* Written in James's 'official' hand, the entry obviously referred to her mother, her real mother, not Gaddy.

Elspeth thought it queer that James had never shown it to her or even mentioned it, queerer still that he had defaced the kirk register at a time when she was nothing to him but a foundling brat, and Gaddy naught but a troublesome stranger.

Penned in dark ink, bold in the margin, was an additional entry, a name. *Bell Harper.*

Oblivious to the chill, to the blundering wind, Elspeth seated herself on the ladderback chair and, trembling, began to read the history of passion and threat, subterfuge and guilt which had been her husband's torment for two decades.

* * *

Anna met the laird as he emerged from the top of the back stairs. She had crept from the bedroom in response to the disturbance and had crouched at the top of the main staircase from which position she had caught enough of the conversation to pick up the gist of the night's events.

"Randall," she said, "it's Matt, is it not?"

Clad only in an indecently short shift, Anna padded behind the laird as he strode into the library.

The fire flickered in the hearth but the candles had been extinguished and Randall ordered her curtly, as if she were a mere servant, to put a taper to the wicks at once.

Anna did not obey.

Hands on hips, she snapped, "Will ye not tell me what's happenin'?"

Randall ignored her. He tugged open a recessed cupboard, dug inside and brought out his tunic, his sabre in its scabbard and a swagged leather belt with side buckles. He flung the equipment behind him on to the floor, dug deeper and came out with a heavy, oblong box.

"Light me a candle, Anna."

"Not 'til ye tell me –"

"Damn you, girl."

He caught her by the arm and swung her bodily towards the hearth. Anna gasped but no longer dared defy him.

Swiftly she stooped, lit one of the tapers and transferred flame to the candles in the brackets over the hearth.

Randall placed the box on the floor, knelt by it, opened it and took out a stubby Spanish pistol. Expertly, in moments, he fitted a flint to the percussion screw, held the weapon at arm's length and full-cocked the powerful mainspring. He pressed the trigger. Starting away, Anna involuntarily covered her head with her arms. Even without powder and ball, unloaded, the pistol made a deadly, wicked clack as the flint chopped down into the flashpan.

Anna gave a little scream but Randall paid her not the least attention. He took a chamois bag from the box, deposited into it a small powder horn and other necessities for the firing of the weapon then, standing, dragged the tunic to him with his foot and began to dress.

Anna had had enough. She strutted to him, caught at the tunic sleeve, pulled it tightly, drawing the laird off balance. He rounded on her.

"Why did you do it?" he snarled.

"Do what?"

"Peach on your husband."

"I never did."

"Do not lie to me, Anna."

"I had nothin' to do wi' burnings an' murders."

"Perhaps not, but did you not inform the Revenue Officers that Matt would deliver illicit spirits to Kennart?"

"What proof is there I'd –"

"You told me, Anna."

"An' you said –"

"I said I would give you an answer in due course. But that wasn't sufficient for you. God, girl, do you not see what you've done?"

"Matt *was* runnin' whisky."

Randall buttoned the heavy tunic across his chest, fitted the belt about his waist and clipped the scabbard to it.

"What – what's that for?" said Anna. "The sword?"

"You disobeyed me," said Randall. "You acted without a thought for consequences –"

"I can be yours now, Randall. Whatever's happened at Kennart t'night, Matt's to blame for it an' we'll be free o' him, come what may."

"Come what may!" Randall shouted. "Come what may! You bitch. How can you condemn your husband to death? For that's what you have done."

"He'll get off, you'll see," said Anna uncertainly.

She was close to tears. Nothing had gone as she had planned. It should have been clean and quick, Matt either slain by the King's Officers or arrested on the spot. She could not understand why the building had been fired or some stranger knifed to death, nor could she quite fit Matt into the violent pattern of events. It was not contrition or concern for Matt that brought tears to her eyes but Randall's cold anger and the realisation that she had alienated him.

Now another thought entered her mind. She clutched at Randall's sleeve again.

"What if Matt comes here, comes in search o' me for vengeance?"

"It would be no more than you deserve, Anna."

"You're not blameless," she cried. "You needed no great coaxin' t' take me from him."

"That much is true," Randall admitted. "But my capacity for vindictiveness is not equal to yours. Do you think I would have allowed you to peach on him?"

"What if he comes here t' kill me?" Her fear was genuine.

The laird hesitated then said, "He'll have more than enough to do in escaping the hunt."

"You dinna know Matt as I do. He'll come here t' cut my throat if he can."

"In which case," said Randall, "it's imperative that I run him to earth before anybody else finds him."

Anna wiped her cheeks with her wrist and squinted quizzically at the laird. "You'll ride alone?"

"Where will he go?"

"Why the sabre, Randall, why the pistol?"

"To protect myself."

"Against Matt?"

"Where will he take refuge?"

"If there's a fight, if Matt resists –"

"All will be solved."

"Aye, an' nobody will ever blame the laird."

"Where?" said Randall.

"Eardmore," Anna said.

Desperation dropped away as Matt left Balnesmoor behind and climbed through the gullies of the Orrals on to the high moor. For the sake of speed he had been tempted to cut across the pastures of Dyers' Dyke on to the ridgeway but it provided the only path for horsemen and he had an image in mind of an army of his enemies pouring along it to outstrip him and hack him to pieces.

Alone in the midst of the windy wasteland, however, Matt's confidence began to return and with it a certain thin optimism. Pad would still be at Eardmore. Pad would help him to escape. Pad would provide him with a horse – the first essential – and food and perhaps a little money to see him through his long journey across the border into England. Hue and cry would have its limits. If he could be out of the Lennox by morning he would have a struggling chance of escaping free and clear of the pursuit.

Going to Moss House, for whatever muddled motive, had been to his advantage. The bandaged leg hurt hardly at all and he was losing no blood. He wished, though, that he had taken a moment to filch a dry shirt and breeks from the steward's cupboard. He had been too hasty in his flight, too moved by mistrust of Elspeth. She had done him no wrong nor given evidence that she supposed him capable of murder; yet the squawk of that English voice at the front door had rubbed up his panic like shavings in a tinder-box and he had been out of the kitchen and across the garden before he could control himself. He had not even had the foresight to arm himself with a carving-knife or scrape a half-loaf or piece of beef from the larder to keep his strength up.

Ribbons of cloud skimmed over the skyline but there was moonlight to steer by and he had ride-knowledge of the terrain and enough sense not to trot lest he step into one of the green, seeping bogs or trip and twist a limb on the tough hag. He walked at a steady pace, concentrating on the ground ahead of him, stopping to take a bearing on the hill shape every now and then and, he believed, making such headway that he would be into Eardmore long before the King's Officers could forestall and outrun him.

Panting, Matt came over the last hunch of the moor on to flat ground that bit like a wedge into the hillocks behind the remote community. He could see the black outlines of dwellings but nary a light; which was all to the good. Eardmore might be Pad Tomelty's kingdom but Matt did not trust the inhabitants there any more than he trusted the folk in the villages of the strath.

Wryly he thought of Jacko, how his pals had liked Jacko, had roared with laughter at the wee beast's antics but how not a one of them would turn out to help when Jacko had got lost. Perhaps it was as well that Jacko had departed. He would have been obliged this night to steal back to Pine Cottage to burden himself with the wicker cage during his jink out of Scotland; he would not have left Jacko behind.

Flagging a little, Matt made his way across lumpy grazing to the broken-down barn. At any moment he expected one of Eardmore's scrofulous mongrels to yap warning of his approach. But none did. The dwellings seemed as deserted as if he had been gone for half a lifetime and Eardmore had at last been cleared and left to rot. The barn door was roped on the outside. Matt untied and pulled it open enough to allow him to slip inside.

The wind harped in warped rafters, drummed through buckled boards and spun chaff in whirligigs across the earthen floor.

"Pad. Pad, it's me. It's Matt come back."

Pad was not in the barn.

It was dark as a pit and at first Matt could see nothing. He groped to a pile of sour hay and thrust his arms into it. He was seeking the solidity of kegs stored there, the flagons of ripe whisky ready for delivery. He found nothing. He stepped into the loose hay, trampled on it as on air, discovered not a trace of barrel or bottle.

Fear snared him again, pinching his stomach, closing his throat. He gave a choked cry and bolted from the barn. Padric Tomelty had shifted out the whisky, for no reason other than the trouble which had erupted far, far below in Kennart.

Three hours, more, since he had confronted Fitter; it would take the King's Officers that to ride round by Harlwood. But somebody, some sneak from Kennart, had been on pony-back almost before the knife had entered Fitter's gullet. Which of the weavers was Tomelty's spy, so sharp and swift that he had known what was what from the instant the confusion broke out?

Matt stood uncertainly by the side of the barn, head raised, sniffing and sighting round the crude square of cottages. Not a light, not a sound; the village had been 'cleared'.

They would all be up there in the hills, in one of the sheltered dells of sweet grass, wrapped in shawls and blankets, drams from a tapped keg to keep them warm, their animals about them, moved far enough from the hamlet not to be heard by revenue or militia. Tomelty's stocks of whisky, trundled behind a pony, would be deeved away in the autumn bracken or tucked in niches in the crumble-rock.

Pad had heard the news, perhaps had known all along what would happen at Kennart. Back the thought came roaring that Tomelty had betrayed him, that the stranger – Fitter – had died with a monstrous lie on his lips. Jamie Moodie might not have been the contriver after all. It gave Matt no consolation, he had already survived an excursion to Moss House. He had climbed to Eardmore to be safe, to find protection and friendly assistance. Had he stumbled headlong into a trap?

Paralysed with doubt, uncertain of his conclusions, Matt edged again into the shelter of the barn.

Were they here?

Were the King's Officers in position?

Watching him? Waiting! Ready to pounce?

Matt strained his ears to catch the tell-tale whinny of a horse or the clink of a bridle but the wind that flooded the moor bore too much volume for small sounds to be audible. He heard the horse only when it appeared, sight and sound linked. The huge, towering animal stepped high and dainty out of the north-west wind into the square.

Matt fell back into the barn. He dropped to all fours, crawled across the earthen floor to the hay pile and burrowed into it. One man meant others. One horse, one rider would not be considered enough to corner a dangerous fugitive from Georgie's justice. If they saw him, he would be done for. He lay motionless in the stinking hay, arms over his head, his face peeking out.

The door battered and clacked as if it were shouting a warning to the riding men, betraying him. One minute passed, then two, three. No alarm was cried and nobody entered the barn. Matt did not move. His eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness and he could see, just, a broken trestle by the rear wall. Wood would provide a weapon, a club. He must arm himself, make a fight of it. If he had to die here in Eardmore then he would die on his own terms, like a man.

The hay whispered as he rolled through it and came to his feet, crouched. He darted to the broken trestle and groped about it, found a suitable length of wood to make a club, then closed his hand against a hard, metal object. A rusty scythe-blade without a handle. He wished he had light to see by for he felt sure that the shaft would be lying about too, but the clop of hoofs at the door of the barn forced him to improvise. He uncoiled the muffler from about his throat and wrapped it quickly around the bottom curve of the blade. Blunted though it was, the scythe made a fine weapon and he chose it in preference to the club. He had a notion that he might be able to immobilise the horses with it if he could work close enough in the dark. Matt had no opportunity to dwell on his fancy, however. The barn door opened wider, patching the floor with a pearly moonlight. Matt knelt by the trestle, hidden, the blade held in both hands.

One horseman only, tall and elegant in the open doorway; the man eased the stallion forward and halted on the threshold. The animal, Matt saw, was a handsome grey, familiar in its grace and vitality.

"Sinclair. I have seen you. Come out."

Matt was too foxy to fall to such obvious tricks but it startled him to be summoned by Randall Bontine, added another strand to his confusion.

"I'm alone, Sinclair."

A lie, of course; the laird had been sent for by the King's men, had led them here. Anna would have told them where he might be found, though Eardmore was hardly a secret among the villagers who knew Pad Tomelty. It no longer seemed to matter who had turned the hunt in his direction, who had given information to the revenue officers. For all Matt knew, or cared, Bontine was at the back of the plot to bring him to the gallows.

"You have precious little time, Sinclair, if you are to be away before daylight," Bontine shouted. "I can see the streak in the sky to the east already."

Still Matt said nothing. He was directly in front of the doorway. He would have preferred to come at the stallion from the flank. Bontine was shrewd. He would not bring his mount into the dark interior of the barn where he would lose the advantage of mobility. Matt held the scythe ready, listening to catch sounds of other riders who were perhaps circling the barn.

"Sinclair, I give you my word that I'm alone."

Matt shouted, "Aye, an' what worth is the word o' a man who has stolen my wife?"

"Anna has naught to do with what's between us now."

"Come in, then, come in an' step down."

"I'm not the one the revenue officers seek, Sinclair. No, nor am I entirely stupid. What do you have, a knife?"

"Come in an' see, laird."

"By God, I believe you think you can best me."

"Are you truly alone?"

"Yes."

"How did ye know about Eardmore?"

"Anna told me."

"Then I'm not to be taken alive."

"I give you –"

"Your word, laird? I'm a fool in your eyes, perhaps, but no' such a fool as that."

"I've no wish to kill you. I'm here to help you escape."

"Hah!"

"Do not force me to come for you, Sinclair. I'm armed with sword and pistol and might do you serious injury."

"Have ye not done me that already, Sir Randall?"

"She was never yours, Sinclair. I did not steal her from you. Besides, Anna is no man's possession."

"Under law she was my wife."

"Do not let pride, of all things, bring you down."

Sabre had grown impatient with the exchange and shook his head, uttering a snicker of temper and stepping sideways in the doorway.

Matt lifted the scythe blade to his shoulder as the laird backed the horse out of the door. Sir Randall had roped the door back at some point, Matt realised, for it no longer rattled and flapped in the wind.

Matt rose and crabbed quietly to his left out of the spill of half-light. He sprinted across the angle of the barn to the inner wall, then, having found volition at last, pivoted around the post and almost collided with the stallion.

If it had been the laird on foot, Matt would have swung the blade and cut him down. But he could not bring himself to mutilate the stallion, the huge, energetic creature which he had tended during Mr Randall's years in Spain, which he had ridden so proudly into the rain to Glasgow on the night of the old laird's death. He had admired the thoroughbred too long. He gripped the pad around the blade tightly with both fists and willed himself to strike. It would have been simple to slice the rusty metal, smash the stallion's pastern bones and lame the beast, drive the point up into its belly. But he could not do it to Sabre. The scythe stuck in his hands while the horse pranced hard by him.

Matt ducked to one side. He kept the wall of the barn close so that Bontine could not run him down. The laird was occupied in controlling his mount, shifting and cajoling with the rein.

Mad at his own squeamishness, Matt tore around the gable into the mouth of the wind. He could not escape now. He had beggared his only chance of taking revenge against Bontine for all the ills the laird had brought down upon him, for loyalty squandered and love stolen away. He could not challenge Randall Bontine in fair fight, man to man, upon the ground. With the scythe slung over his shoulder like a token of his class, Matt ran away.

Bontine was out of the saddle. He held the rein in his left hand to keep the stallion from bolting. The back, not the cutting edge, of the soldier's sword pinned Matt to his knees. Matt waited for the expert stroke that would sever his head from his body.

"Take him," Bontine said.

He was offering the rein, the stallion.

"But –"

"He knows you. He'll ride for you, Sinclair. Take him."

"So you can murder me as a horse-thief?"

"I need no excuse, Sinclair. I have the power to kill you as a fugitive without much fear of reprimand."

"Do it then an' stop tormentin' me."

"I'm no butcher. Here, take the damned rein before I think the better of it," said Randall. "Sabre's strong as well as fleet. He'll carry you out of the Lennox. I suggest you ride towards Edinburgh, across the Carron Water, and keep off the turnpikes until you are beyond Stirling."

"An' what then?"

"Do not try to sell the stallion. It's too fine an animal and will draw attention to you."

Matt said, "I could leave it at an inn with instructions it had t' be returned t' Ottershaw."

"Yes," said Randall. "Give the inn-keeper or ostler money and promise a second fee at Ottershaw."

"I wouldn't be wantin' Sabre fastened to a dung-cart on some mangy farm," Matt said.

"Get up."

Matt scrambled to his feet.

Randall retreated a yard from him and gave Sabre a nudge with his elbow, extending the reins towards Sinclair. The stallion reached out its muzzle, sniffed at Matt, snickered and showed teeth. Tentatively Matt accepted the leathers. He noticed that Randall Bontine had not sheathed the sword, however, and when the laird slid his right hand into the breast of his tunic, Matt half expected to be shot or struck down with a knife.

The laird brought out a leather purse and tossed it to Matt.

"Silver," he said. "Ten pounds in coin. A guinea to an ostler, or to a carrier if you do not trust an inn. Do not ride Sabre until he's blown and do not leave him wet."

"Why are you doin' this? Is it for her?"

"For Anna?" Randall Bontine laughed. "God, Sinclair, she would have you dead."

Matt gave a snort. "Aye, but you'd not, since then ye might fall victim t' her too, eh?"

"I'm not as you suppose me to be. Take Sabre and ride away, Sinclair, before I forget who I am."

Matt put up no further argument. He did not care if he had been made party to a cynical trade, had been given his life in exchange for his wife, with horse and purse thrown in as make-weight. He swarmed into the saddle and brought Sabre round to face the east, on to the same path he had taken with the pack-pony only hours ago.

It was short of sunrise but the wind had lifted cloud from the horizon and the shapes of the hills, outlined against the bands of yellow, were tinted red as turning leaves.

"Was it you sent the Revenue Officers t' raid Kennart?"

"No," Randall Bontine replied.

"Was it Anna?"

"Be away with you, Sinclair, before I lose patience. What's done's done. Those of us who stay behind will knit up the truth if we can."

"Aye." Matt gave Sabre just a touch of the heel. "Never fear, laird, you'll not be bothered wi' me again."

Horse and rider merged with the charcoal landscape, then, coming from the grazing, were framed distinctly against the dawn flush.

Randall brought the Spanish pistol, primed and loaded, from his tunic. He drew the action to full cock. Gripping right wrist with left hand he raised the gun and took steady aim upon Sinclair's back. In the shrill wind he could almost make out Anna's voice insisting that, for her sake, he squeeze the trigger. But Matt Sinclair was out of range, out of harm. Randall lowered the weapon and stuck it back securely into his tunic. He picked the sabre from the ground, wiped it on his sleeve and sheathed it.

Bands of light were stretching. He could see mountains to the north raised out of darkness, the dropping moon all wan, rinsed for another night. Soon Tomelty's gang would creep out of hiding; he did not wish to be discovered by them, though they would not dare harm the laird of Ottershaw.

Turning up his collar, Randall set off down the ridge towards Balnesmoor and Ottershaw, ignoring his aches and hurts. He had done the right thing, the honourable thing. Now he must go further still and break with the girl he loved, not to punish her for presumption but to save what was left of his reputation and preserve the tradition of the house.

Gilbert would help him – at a price.

Anna, no matter how she railed, would have no choice but to obey.

It was dawn before James returned to Moss House. The expanses of moor and hillside had emerged with daylight and, as he walked the horse to the stable, he had a dreary realisation that Matt Sinclair might escape him yet; and with Matt Sinclair gone loose the rest had been futile.

The Cunninghams were dead. There would be no more letters, no more threats from those fiends; James had not one drop of remorse in him for what had happened to the shopkeepers. Indeed, if lying on the path with a knife through his throat had been Sinclair and not Hugh Fitter, then he would have been delirious with happiness, would have ridden the mare up to the stables with a whoop and a cheer, would have gone lightly along the path by the wall to the kitchen door, lifted his daughter into his arms and showered her with kisses. But Sinclair had evaded him and, though the day's search might dig the man out of hiding, Weaver Moodie had only been unburdened of one anxiety to be laden with another.

It was a quiet, reasonable sort of madness that possessed James Moodie. He still had sufficient control to practise its forms only in his own company, to let out the slack of rational behaviour only when he was alone.

The nearer James approached to Moss House, however, the further the madness receded, replaced by a slack, exhausted despair. He craved sleep, craved softness, the feel of his granddaughter in his arms, to hear her innocent, uncalculating little cries which he would gently soothe. He would walk her about the corridors until he had worn away the last of his terrors, the fear that Matt Sinclair would not be caught but would haunt him with letters and demands for evermore.

Luke McWilliams was up and about. He took the sore mare from Mr Moodie. James said not a word to the boy and the boy had wit enough to ask no questions, though he burned with curiosity.

By the back path, between moor and garden, James came to the kitchen door and found it unlocked. He opened it quietly and stepped into the corridor.

Perhaps Tolland had stayed up, the steward faithful in ignorance. But there was no sign of Tolland in the kitchen. James headed for the study where, on the desk, he would find a decanter of brandy and a jug of water to melt the knot in his chest.

She was seated with her head on her arm, golden and hazy in the light of the lamp, a dream not a ghost, ledgers and papers spread out on the desk-top before her.

She had been crying. Her cheeks glistened as, at his approach, she lifted her head. She stared at him with such anguish and revulsion that James felt as if his heart would stop.

Shame came upon him. Shame for all that he had done. Shame for the sins of omission, the neglect, the conniving, the unspoken lies. He had ruined Elspeth, destroyed her. He went forward, arms out, tears swimming in his eyes, to offer her, at last, love. But it was too late for healing, and his daughter was not ruined, not broken after all.

Elspeth got to her feet.

"What have you done?" James whispered.

"Found you out."

James nodded.

"And what have you found out, dearest?"

"Who you are. Who I am."

"They're dead."

Elspeth frowned. "Do you mean the shopkeepers?"

"All dead."

"Matt – he isn't –"

"Have no fear on that score, dearest. I'll have him. He'll not tell anyone."

With a sudden lunge James grabbed at the papers on the desk-top. His fists rose with paper in them, met and ripped the letters into tatters, scattered the fragments like snow into the air. Some fell into the funnel of the oil lamp and charred, sending wisps of blue smoke into the air.

"You may burn them all, James. I've read them."

"Liars, the Cunninghams. Damned liars."

He leaned his knuckles on the desk and pressed himself forward until it seemed that he was perched on toe tip. He looked huge, bull-like in the glow of the lamp.

"I know who you are," Elspeth said again.

"Well then, you know."

"Did you murder her too?"

"Murder? Why do y' talk of murder? I've murdered nobody."

"Only the Cunninghams."

"They were evil."

"What of Bell Harper? Was she evil too?"

"Bell?"

"My – my mother. Did you not slay her too?"

"She died because it was God's will."

"Your will, James."

"She had no right to come to Balnesmoor."

"She had nowhere else to go, had she?"

"You know nothing of such people."

"I know who you are, what you've done."

"Aye, lass, but do you know why?"

"All these years," said Elspeth. "Year upon year upon year, pilin' one lie upon another, James, until you'd smother us all beneath the weight of them. My mother, my real mother, Gaddy, me, an' now my daughter, Mary Jean."

"I'll care for her. I'll love her. She'll be a lady, wealthy an' refined. No stain will touch her," James Moodie said. "She's mine."

"No."

"She is mine, as you were never mine."

"No."

"I tell you *yes.*"

"If I defy you, will you be shot o' me too? Because I offend you, threaten you? Be rid o' me the way you got rid of my mother, the shopkeepers, Matt. Matt did nothing –"

"He was your lover."

"He was never my lover."

"Even now, you defend him?"

"Matt Sinclair had no part in any o' this."

"I *saw* him."

"You saw nothing but a shadow of yourself."

"Do you think I'm blind?"

"Aye," Elspeth shouted. "Blind, blind. I do think you're blind."

James smirked. He flung himself back from the threatening posture at the desk. He spoke swaggeringly. "You canna deny me the child, Elspeth."

"I'm your child. Mary Jean is not."

"Who would believe it? You must keep silent. It would be a corruption, a taint on her all her life long if you spoke out."

"How can you put it on to her, generations removed from your sin?" Elspeth cried. "Is it not enough that you got me by lies?"

"How else could I have got you?"

"For God's sake! Could you not have told me the truth?"

"That I'm your natural father? Is it palatable, the truth, Elspeth?" James stepped back to the desk, head lowered. "Would you not have asked me about her, about Bell Harper?"

"Who was she?"

"A trollop."

"No, I dinna believe –"

"She let me, a common weaver, take her, did she not?"

"Perhaps she –"

"She could not love *me*. Do you think I was such a fool, even then, to be taken in?"

"God in Heaven!"

"A miserable cottage-weaver from the country. She would have let me do anythin' to her."

"She – perhaps she loved you."

"How could she? She did not know what I was, only what she supposed me to be, lost in the damned city."

"Why did you desert her?"

"She was trash."

"Ah! You deserted her because she wasn't fine enough for you."

"An elder in the kirk, a weaver who owed nothin' to a master. How could I burden myself with trash?"

"Did you know she was carryin'?"

"She dumped the brat on my doorstep, did she not?"

"I'm that brat."

"Aye, you are. My daughter. My flesh an' blood."

"Could you not own me? Take me in?"

"I took you in. I gave you my name."

"Twenty years after, twenty years too late."

"Now it's – it's well, though. Unless Sinclair escapes."

"Well?"

"Nobody knows."

"I know," said Elspeth.

"I have Mary Jean. She'll love me."

"I know the truth, that you're my father."

"In the letters. All in the letters, I suppose."

"Enough," said Elspeth. "You killed her through cruelty. My mother. Bell Harper. If it hadn't been for Gaddy Patterson, a drover's woman, you'd have let me be lost t' you forever."

"Only you know the truth," said James, as if the mouthing of the fact caught him by surprise. "Only you."

"Aye, so will you kill me as well?"

"How can I? You're –"

"For Mary Jean?"

"I must protect her at all costs."

"Protect her first from yourself, James."

"Do you *not* understand what I have *done* to protect her?"

"Weaver Moodie. Elder Moodie. The great James Simpson Moodie. God! I canna breathe in this house for the stink of your rotten hypocrisy. Let me out."

Elspeth emerged from behind the desk. But he could not release her yet. Confession and justification; he had to make her understand the magnitude of *his* sacrifice.

He caught her by the arm. Having experienced his violence once, Elspeth struggled, beating at him with her fists. He struck her with his forearm upon the side of the head, making a glare of false light blaze in her head. She swayed, almost fell, only her presence of mind saving her. She groped for the heavy roan-bound ledger, grasped it in two hands and swung it flat into her father's face.

James gave a little jump and clasped his hands to his nose. Blood trickled from one nostril. Dazed, he leaned against the desk. Elspeth walked past him into the corridor, along it and up the stairs to the nursery. Her head ached but she was improbably calm. Even when she heard him roaring beneath her she did not increase her pace, did not fly from him. Tom Tolland had not returned from Ottershaw and there was no man in the house to protect her and her baby. The female servants would be cowering in the hall. She hoped that James's bellowing from below would bring Betty to the nursery door. She refused to run from her husband, her father. Perhaps that was him in her, his strength of will, his defiant pride. But Elspeth could not relate herself to James Moodie in that manner. She was, and always would be, Gaddy Patterson's daughter; the corruption in James Moodie was a separate, alien thing, roaring below.

"What is it, Mistress Elspeth?"

Betty stepped on to the landing, a pair of brass coal-tongs raised in her right hand.

"My – my husband's gone – mad."

"Drink?"

"Aye," said Elspeth, seizing the simplest explanation. "Brandy in excess."

"Come in quick, then."

Elspeth slipped into the nursery. Betty threw the big bolt and turned the key in the lock.

The women stood back from the door as it shook with James Moodie's first pounding assault. The sounds were those a demon might make, wailing, snarling cries, fists and fingernails ripping at the woodwork. The door vibrated as if a malignant force sought entry.

White-faced, Betty glanced at Elspeth.

"Where's Mister Tolland?"

"Gone t' Ottershaw with Mister Sinclair."

"What – what's really wrong wi' Mister Moodie?"

"He's drunk, Betty, an' it has affected his reason."

The servant stepped back as once more the door shook and vibrated The key waggled in the lock, fell clinking to the floor. In the night cradle Mary Jean woke and whimpered. The maid went to her charge immediately, standing with her back to the doorway as if to reject the violence there.

Elspeth faced up to it.

She was not afraid. James could not reach her or her child here in the nursery. Whatever madness took hold of her father had festered for twenty years or more. She saw in the outburst the poison of selfish pride, the innominate pride of the male who would be father and husband but could never bring himself to be lover, could never give love in case it weakened him in the role of master. James Simpson Moodie had been warped by un-loving. He had built an empire of wool-woven cloth to numb his pain. Small wonder that Gaddy had detested him and in turn he had both hated and loved the wild Highland woman who had come as a stranger from the glens.

In time the beating upon the door grew weaker, the cries became feeble and hoarse. The thump-thud-thump of his boot seemed childish and vain as he kicked against the panels. Elspeth would never open to such a man, would not yield to him no matter how he raged and wept and demanded his right to be forgiven because, by accident, he had fathered her. She sensed that he was still outside, slumped in exhaustion at the base of the door. But she had her baby to suckle and Mary Jean would not wait.

"Are ye reposed enough?" Betty asked when Elspeth lifted the baby from the cradle, breast already exposed. "It's said excitement curdles milk."

"I'm fine, Betty."

Elspeth seated herself on the nursing-chair, took the crying baby and held her soothingly while James whimpered outside.

"See how hungry she is," said Betty, pretending that all was as normal.

Elspeth touched Mary Jean's cheek, and gums and lips fastened upon her nipple.

Minutes later there was a fresh commotion upon the stairs. Tom Tolland's voice came to them. They heard him cajoling James to come downstairs again, to take rest. And, by the silence, James complied.

Uncertainly, Betty said, "Is – is Mister Moodie sick?"
And Elspeth answered, "Yes."

Anna kept her vigil by the library window throughout the night and into the broad hours of the morning. The big room was warm and she did not spare the logs – logs which Matt himself had cut, perhaps – or the candles that she had trimmed. None of the other servants came upstairs.

Anna's fears that Matt might sneak back to Ottershaw and take revenge on her for her treachery waned as daylight crept across the parks and uncoupled the sky from the hills. The wind too abated and there was the promise of September sunshine in the streaked cloud to the east. She refreshed herself with sips of wine from the laird's decanter and nibbled pickings from the supper dishes which had not been gathered away.

Below in the kitchen Mrs Lacy would be questioning the girls to discover what dreadful things had happened during the night and what the rumpus in the kitchen yard had meant. Servants from the hall would be eating a hasty breakfast and bustling, gossiping, to their duties. Brigit would not report for service. Unless Anna's guess was far wrong, Matt was by no means the only hireling in the parish and, with the King's Officers rampaging about, there would be a few 'catches' made and many a lad lying very low. The Tomelty family, Brigit with them, would have turned invisible, flitted away into nowhere as they had done more than once in the past. Padric would not confront trouble at any price. She would miss Brigit's chat and her impudence but that was small cost for being rid of Matt Sinclair, released from the bonds of a marriage which had threatened to strangle her.

Anna felt a certain uneasy satisfaction in the turn of events. Whatever happened to Matt, caught or slain, she would be free of him. That would have been a dab in the eye for her mother who – Anna could never forget – had forced her into the marriage in the first place. What Gaddy would have said to having a daughter pregnant with an heir to Ottershaw Anna could not imagine. She suspected, however, that Gaddy would have come to terms with it and turned it to benefit, for that had always been Gaddy's way.

Now that the wind had dropped, Anna could hear sounds from yard, stables and fields. No matter what doom or destiny intruded, the routines of the farm must continue. Even with Matt Sinclair fleeing from justice, and the laird riding hard after him, cows must be milked, stotts separated for marketing, butter and cheese made, late cropping continued to its conclusion. It would be months or years before Ottershaw would suffer from a lack of management, for the men who did the work from day to day would function like wound springs, without supervision.

Seated by the window, forehead against the glass, Anna tried to imagine what it would be like to be the lady of this place, to be more wife than lover to Randall. She wondered if he would change towards her when she mothered his son. She comforted herself with dreams and fantasy, stilling her anxiety about what was taking place in Eardmore or on some other corner of the moor.

It was after eight o'clock before the laird returned.

Anna had been on the look-out for the stallion. It surprised her when Randall appeared on foot among the trees by the park. He was limping badly and stooped. She had a sudden rush of panic at the thought that Matt might have bested him, might have stuck a blade into Randall too. All Anna's silliness evaporated. With a cry she threw herself back from the window, ran out of the library and down the main staircase. She burst from the front door, scampered down the stone steps and across the lawn, her dark hair tousled, her eyes glittering with tears.

The laird glanced up but did not stop. He did not even change direction. He limped on, dragging a diagonal line for the front of the mansion. Anna reached out her arms to him.

"Did you not find him?" Anna said.

"Yes, I found him at Eardmore."

"Randall, are you wounded?"

"No, only weary beyond belief."

"Is Matt dead, then, or taken?"

"Your husband's gone."

"Gone?"

"Escaped," Randall said.

"On Sabre?"

"I gave him the horse."

"Damn you, Randall, why? Now we'll have to wait four years t' be free of him."

"After what you've done, Anna, I doubt if you'll ever be free of him."

"Randall, I beg you –"

They had reached the stone steps which led up to the front door of the mansion. Hunter, who had returned from the grieve's house some while before, waited discreetly on the terrace.

"Has Sinclair been found, sir?"

"He will not be found, Hunter, unless he is very careless. You may inform Sinclair that his son got safely away from us."

"That's good news, laird."

"And fetch Dunn back from the pine wood."

Anna plucked at Randall's sleeve, demanding his attention, his reassurance. He pulled himself up the steps on to the terrace then stopped and turned to her, placed his hands upon her shoulders and drew her against him. Not without passion, he kissed her upon the mouth – then handed her over to the steward.

"Hunter, take her home."

"Home, laird?"

"To her family. To the Sinclairs."

With that final instruction Randall brushed past Anna, stalked, limping, into the house of the Bontines and closed the door behind him with his heel.

The wind had strewn the lawn with leaves and turned the bracken blond upon the fringes of the moor. By noon, however, the air was almost still again. Sunlight dappled the flanks of Drumglass and shimmered on the knuckle of the loch away beyond Kennart.

Elspeth had slept for three hours, lying dressed upon the bed behind a locked door. On waking, she found the house tranquil. She washed her face at the basin with water poured from the jug, then combed and pinned up her hair. She studied her features for a moment in the glass. She saw no trace of James in them, none that she could discern. She was as fair as her father was dark. Perhaps she resembled one of his sisters or had come into the world in her mother's cast. It mattered not. She could not change her thinking. She could not fit with the knowledge of her identity. She felt strangely calm and relieved, as she had done that day when Gaddy died

She uncurtained the window and looked out at the weather then unlocked her bedroom door, glanced into the corridor, slipped along it to the nursery where Betty and Mary Jean were both wide awake. The baby, chuckling, was being petted in the nurse's arms.

Without waiting, Elspeth fed the baby while Betty, who had slept hardly at all, tidied up the room and prepared the day cot for Mary Jean's afternoon nap.

"Have you heard any news of Matt Sinclair?" Elspeth asked.

"Aye, Mister Tolland had word from Ottershaw just an hour since. Matt Sinclair, it seems, has got away. He stole the laird's horse." Betty, even the God-fearing Betty, giggled at the thought of Sir Randall left stranded. "Stole it an' rode awa' from Eardmore."

"Safe away?"

"There's no word t' the contrary."

"What else, Betty, did Tolland tell you?"

"There's been men here from Kennart about the burnt bodies an' the dead man."

"Has James gone out with them?"

"He wouldn't even see them. He's – pardon me – he's in no fit state for transactin' business the day."

"Where is he?"

"Downstairs. He's still drunk, I think," said Betty. "Tom Tolland sent the men awa' t' speak wi' Mister Rudge."

Elspeth nodded. James was above reproach. He was too wealthy and powerful, too cunning to absorb blame for what had happened to the Cunninghams or to the man named Fitter. She did not hate her father and would not, could not, expose his calumnies and crimes. How could she do so without revealing the most fearful crime of all and, as James had threatened, tainting her daughter's future with the shadow of an incestuous conception?

It mattered not that James had possessed her only as men possess daughters, with deceit but without passion. Convention would destroy them, all three. She had put that behind her immediately. She could not blind herself to James's evil connivances.

It had been in her mind like a crystal from the moment she grasped the import of the letters in the ledger. The Cunninghams' threats and subtle revelations must have twisted into

James's brain like hot wires. But the man, Fitter, had been employed before. She did not doubt that James had had the cattle poisoned to lay his claim on the pastureland and, perhaps, to pull her into his possession. She could not live in comfort with such a man whether he be husband or father.

"Betty," she said, when the baby was fed, "fetch out Mary Jean's overclothes an' wrap her up warmly."

The maid stiffened. "Are ye takin' her out?"

"Aye, the wind's gone an' the sun shines."

"In the garden only?"

"I'll take her down to Ottershaw. I must visit my sister."

"Ottershaw?" said Betty. "It's too far."

"I'll go in the gig."

"I'll come."

"No, Betty."

"Kerr, then. Take Kerr."

"Have the big brown pony put in the shafts. Bring shawls an' back-laced boots."

"What else?"

"Nothing else," said Elspeth.

"Leave Mary Jean for her sleep. I'll walk her in the garden later."

"No. It'll cheer my sister to see her niece."

Betty frowned. The servant was fond of the baby and with an almost maternal instinct seemed to sense the girl's intention. "Will ye be back for tea?"

"Of course I will, Betty. Now hurry, please, before the best of the day's gone."

"Mister Moodie'll –"

"I'll tell my husband where I'm goin', Betty."

A quarter of an hour later it was all done. The gig stood at the front gate, Elspeth was dressed in her warmest clothing and Mary Jean wrapped in a robe and sash over her flannel binder and frock, her tiny face framed in a cap.

With her, Elspeth carried not only the baby but a large muslin bag which she had packed quickly while Betty was downstairs. It contained baby-napkins, blankets, bedgowns and, in a kid-skin reticule, fifteen pounds in coin which had been saved from her inheritance; all that Gaddy had left her that could be counted in material terms.

"What's that?" Betty was even more suspicious. "You'd think ye were off for a month, Mistress Elspeth."

"It contains a few things for my sister."

Elspeth handed Mary Jean to the servant but kept the bag in her hand as she turned along the corridor to the kitchen.

Tolland was not asleep, though the steward too looked tired and drawn. He was seated at the kitchen table eating soup from a bowl when Elspeth disturbed him. He scrambled to his feet, buttoning his waistcoat.

"Where's my husband?" she asked.

"In the study, Mistress Elspeth."

"Is he – better?"

Tolland glanced round at the cook who was a notorious tattle and drew Elspeth out of the kitchen into the corridor. He had the key of the study in his hand and hesitated at the door.

"Did you not say that Mister Moodie was better?"

"Aye, he is. But I took the liberty of lockin' him in."

"Is he so enraged, Tolland?"

"He's not himself. I feared he would create a disturbance which he would soon regret. He's been at the bottle too."

"I see."

Elspeth was torn by indecision.

It would be simplest to run away without confronting James. She dared not tell him the truth, of course, but must convince him of her intention to visit Anna to offer comfort, and to return. If he guessed the truth then he would prevent her leaving Moss House that afternoon and would surely set some guard upon her and the baby, employing men like Fitter for the purpose if he felt he could not trust the servants to do his bidding in the matter. But Elspeth was not so heartless as her father and, though he deserved no kindness, felt a nebulous concern for his welfare.

"If you give me instruction, Mistress, I'll open it," said Tolland. "It's time, perhaps, he was roused."

"Yes, open it."

Tolland unlocked the door.

He stood back and let Elspeth enter.

The curtain was still drawn but there was enough light to show her the chamber. In the fireplace the embers of the ledgers and papers made grey and insubstantial ash and gave off the heavy odour of oil. James had drenched them from the bowl of the lamp, had burned everything, the records of his father's trade as cottage-weaver, his own history too. When the oil had run out he had used brandy from the decanter which lay empty by the hearth.

Tolland said, "I'll wait close, Mistress Elspeth. He's not himself."

"Aye," said Elspeth.

It had been vain, James's effort at destroying the past. On the other hand there had been a certain element of cunning in it, for the documents in that chest provided the only evidence of his connection with the 'agent' Fitter and of the hold that the Cunninghams had exercised upon him. James, even in despair, had been both practical and thorough.

Elspeth had leisure to inspect the scene for James was slumped in a drunken stupor in Mother Moodie's throne-like chair. He occupied it as she had done, had even loose-buckled the leather straps to hold him upright. Glass and bottle, fallen by his hand, indicated that he had drunk quickly, systematically seeking that numbed state which brandy could bring, the sick, uncaring slumber which followed it. His mouth was open and his cheeks caved in. He snored.

It seemed to Elspeth that in the past few days James had gravitated towards the condition which had claimed his mother in her latter years. His hair was thickly streaked with grey and he had reassumed the coarseness that tailoring and grooming had managed to disguise. She had never seen him asleep before, nor drunk. How long would it be before James entered the haven of muttering and demented indifference to the world as it was, until time dispensed its inevitable punishments?

Going softly forward she touched his hand.

"James?" she whispered. "Father?"

The man did not stir into wakefulness but slouched down further into his voluntary bonds and, with a harsh sigh, let his head loll forward.

Elspeth did not try to wake him.

Gently she kissed his brow.

"Goodbye," she murmured.

Turning, she left him in the closet room, alone in the darkness.

Tolland and Betty accompanied her down the path to the vaiting gig.

The steward too seemed to have guessed what was in her nind but did not remonstrate with her or try to prevent her eaving.

"Tolland."

"Aye, Mistress Moodie?"

"Look after him –"

"I will."

" –until I return."

Betty, with tears in her eyes, handed over the baby and Elspeth settled herself on the board in a comfortable position vith Mary Jean in the crook of her elbow, the reins in her ight hand. Elspeth drew in a deep breath.

She snecked the pony into an easy trot, heading along the road into the village. She glanced at Moss House, clean and solid against the rolling quilt of moorland where, in another sort of existence, she had met Michael Blaven and before that had spent her childhood under Gaddy's loving eye.

Sobbing, Betty ran a few paces after the gig. But Elspeth did not turn round and Mary Jean, snuggled against her mother's breast, slept peacefully in the autumn sunlight, rocked by the motion of the wheels.

Six weeks later to the day, travelling in the opposite direction and under a sky which presaged rain, a narrow flat-bed cart pulled by a single horse creaked along the road past Moss House.

Unlike the great procession of Gilbert Bontine's family, the Sinclairs' 'flitting' was scanty, though their destination – Strachan Castle – was the same. A lifetime of devoted service did not amount to much when its accumulations, roped to a cart, added up to but a few sticks of furniture, a basket of clothes, a box of books and a handful of sentimental ornaments which Aileen, over the years, had almost polished away.

Sandy Sinclair was at the reins. His mother, red-eyed, huddled by his side. His sisters, tall girls, trudged by the side of the cart to ease weight on the axles and on the horse which would have to be returned to Ottershaw's stables tomorrow none the worse for wear. Without a high, handsome mare under him, aged by the events of the season, the former grieve of Ottershaw might have been taken by a stranger for naught but a tired old pedlar wending along to yet another fair. Seated on the tailgate, legs dangling, he stared at the ruts in the dirt which the wheel-rims unspooled behind him. By his side sat his daughter-in-law, Anna. Her condition was obvious, a fine swollen belly that she did not have the decency to hide.

The good folk of Balnesmoor did not turn out to speed the grieve, pillar of their enclosed society, upon his way. Like the workers on the Bontine estate they had skulked, embarrassed, indoors, ashamed of Sinclair's shame. But not a one of them, not even Lachlan himself, blamed the laird for relieving him of a position of authority which, under the circumstances and to all concerned, had become untenable.

Sir Randall had not been idle. Bargains had been forged and deals made, laws firmly laid down. Lachlan Sinclair had faithfully implemented the laird's instructions to the letter, without protest. Lachlan worked to terminate his connection with Ottershaw, if not with the Bontines, as if it had been his dearest wish. He found a tenant for Tomelty's abandoned cottage, a decent thatcher with a family. From Buchanan Sinclair hired a young forester who had plans to marry a lassie from Balnesmoor and was glad of employment and a cottage, Pine Cottage, to call his own. Lachlan even selected his own replacement, a progressive, energetic bachelor who had been depute-manager on Lord Rushing's cattle farm in Galloway and who was looking for advancement and a degree of freedom to experiment with breeds and feeds. On Lachlan's recommendation Sir Randall had agreed to take on the man for a trial period of one year.

For the sleepy rural community which gathered round Ottershaw it seemed that changes came thick and fast after the Kennart murders. Cheap free-run whisky was difficult to find since Pad and his clan had vanished from the Lennox and, it was rumoured, had gone to ground in the Pentlands with designs on the parched throats of the gentlemen of Edinburgh. Warrants for the arrest of the felon, Matthew Sinclair, turned dud. The stallion, Sabre, was returned to Ottershaw from a livery in Dunbar, many miles south of Edinburgh. It was assumed that the young man had wriggled out of Scotland

and found a hiding-place in England. With him, Matt took all the blame for events at Kennart.

It was predicated by officers of the Sheriff that the fire and murders had stemmed from a quarrel between smugglers. Hugh Fitter's history, such of it as could be unearthed, confirmed that he was a man of violent disposition and dark connections. Not one word of his contracts with James Simpson Moodie came to light, however, and Mr Moodie was left to get on with his money-making affairs without impediment or taint.

For all that he appeared blameless, James Moodie was never the same again. It was as if the firing of the shop under Rowan Hill had singed his reason. Certainly it frightened his young wife so much that he was obliged to send her, with his baby daughter, to reside with his sister in Perth. Or so the story went. Tom Tolland kept his mouth shut, Betty too. Even Kerr, who was inclined to gossip, was guarded in her slanders on that score. It was odd, though, that Elspeth Moodie had last been seen driving alone towards Glasgow and that her gig had been left in front of the inn at Blanefield, quite the wrong direction for Perth.

Anna, of course, imagined that she was privileged to know the truth. Moodie had been down on her, raving and ranting, with not a thought for the grief-stricken Sinclairs. But Moodie had been forced in the end to accept Anna's assertion that Elspeth had not visited her, had left no message, had run off without farewell.

The timing of Elspeth's departure suggested a tie with Matt's disappearance but no matter how she fitted it together Anna could find no feasible link. At that point Anna was not thinking too logically, overwhelmed by fear that the King's Officers might trace the letter which she had sent to the gauger in Drymen, the letter which had led to the conflagration at Kennart and, in all probability, to murder. With each passing day, however, the threat of exposure waned and by September's end Anna was inclined to feel that Elspeth had slighted and rejected her too, as had Randall and everybody else.

She had been bargained away and could do nothing other than agree with the plans that had been made for her, short of taking to the hills or following the old drove road into Glasgow, as Elspeth perhaps had done. Anna did not have the determination of her sister, nor, finally, the impetus. Though Randall would have no truck with her, the memory of his last kiss, given against the grain on the terrace of the mansion, nurtured in Anna hope that one day she might be brought out of exile and restored, with her child, to Ottershaw, close to the only man she had ever loved, or ever would.

Anna had no information on what it had cost Randall to find a place for her. The laird had been obliged to bribe Gibbie to take her. Gilbert's 'price' had been the financial business of Ottershaw, and a flock of notes of agreement and fund transfers had gone from Hildebrand's chambers, and from the library at Ottershaw, to dockets in the Falkirk Farmers' Bank, a 'catch' which enhanced Gilbert's reputation and the company's stock.

In fact Gibbie was only too pleased to have Sinclair at Strachan Castle for Gibbie had been swayed by Alicia and had begun to see himself in progress towards wealth, position and power; and land, no matter how he made his livings, was the ultimate possession, and the tending of land the ultimate Bontine responsibility. Lachlan Sinclair would be a valuable asset when the time came to expand the holdings of Strachan Castle. In the meantime the remaining son, Alexander, would earn his keep as a cattle-man and the girls and the wife would be set to work in the great rambling house under Alicia's hawk-like eye.

Anna Sinclair, his brother's mistress and wife of the notorious outlaw, was not welcome. But Randall had insisted upon it and Gibbie had finally surrendered on the point for the sake of 'business'. She could be kept out of sight in the kitchen or the little dairy shed, cared for until her child was born. Gilbert was wary on this score for he had a feeling that his brother was genuinely attached to the wild hill lass, for all her lack of pedigree and faults in character, and that Randall would not, in the long run, see her bastard starve in case the babe was his after all.

So Anna left Ottershaw with the rest of the Sinclairs on a lowering afternoon, and ground up on the cart through the village and on to the top road that led away to Fintry. She had lived with them for six long weeks, had endured Aileen's hatred and Lachlan's silent recriminations, the sneering jibes of Matt's sisters. She would endure more, much more, under gaunt Alicia Bontine. Yet they had taken her in, had fed and kept her warm and given her a bed to sleep in. She could not blame them for hating her since she had stolen away their son and, so they believed, had ruined him. There was no bargain struck with the Sinclairs. They obeyed only the ancient, immutable law that decreed that a family must take care of its own.

Miserably, Anna sat on the tailgate of the cart, no longer childish enough to weep and seek attention. In her, smaller though than the growing babe, was a tiny kernel of belief in the ultimate power of her dreams, that 'binding' which defied nature and family, which might bring her back to Randall.

Already she missed her sight of the laird, the sound of his voice, the touch of his hands upon her. Rocking in the rhythm of the cart she felt the first spit of the rain upon her cheek and raised her head and looked away towards the Orrals which were veiled with mist. And saw him there, saw first the gig with the hood raised and Tom Tolland, happed in a greatcoat and muffler, sitting as patient as a monument within; saw James Moodie standing on the mound of grass at the base of the sign that marked the limit of Balnesmoor, the sign whose arms pointed in all directions, to Harlwood, Balfron, Killearn and Fintry, and by extension outward into the world.

He came running, Moodie did, running with scuttering little steps, like an auld wife chasing hens. His hands were raised, his features pinched and anxious yet ingratiating as if he expected a rebuff as sharp as a whip snapped at his head.

"Stop, please stop," he cried as he came abreast of the cart.

Sandy, nonplussed, drew the rein and slowed the horse to less than walking-pace, hardly moving at all, but not halting quite for it was a far piece to Strachan Castle and dusk would come early with the rain.

Peering upward, James Moodie minced down the length of the cart, crying out, "Do you know her? Do you know her? Have you seen her?"

Turning, Aileen Sinclair appealed to her husband who, rousing himself from brooding, straightened and gave reply.

"Aye, Mister Moodie, we know your wife."

"Have you seen her, then, on your travels?"

"No, sir, we have not."

James was trailing behind the cart now, following at funeral pace along the road towards Fintry.

"You." He nodded to Anna. "I know you, do I not?"

"I'm Anna Sinclair."

"Have I seen you in Glasgow? Do *you* know her?"

"She's gone," said Anna. "Elspeth's gone. She's not wi' us."

Moodie stopped in his tracks. An expression of amazement opened on his face. "Gone? Where's she gone? Can I not find her?" He ran a few more steps, his hands against his chest as if in supplication, in the habit of the praying elder that he had been once in days too long ago to bear remembering.

"If you see her," he called out as the cart creaked on, "if you see her, tell her she will always be loved."

"Dear God!" Sinclair growled. "What has become of him!"

James Moodie raised his hand uncertainly, gave the Sinclairs a little wave, then, like a restless sparrow darted away to the hedgerow and, standing on tiptoe, called out across the misty fields, "*Elspeth. Elspeth. Elspeth*," calling still until the echo of his voice dwindled and was absorbed by the air.

Anna could see what would become of him, how the weaver would waste his days in the dream of Elspeth's return, crying into the dust of the field-crossings, over the pasture and the tilth, crying into the time that was gone and never would return.

An unexpected sadness came upon Anna. Tears welled into her eyes. She had nobody to whom she could turn, nobody to care for her, to give her love, yet she did not weep only for herself but for Gaddy and for Elspeth, Matt and the poor lost man by the crossroads sign.

The grieve said quietly, "What ails you, lass?"

"I – I don't know."

"Here," he said, "lean on me for a while."

Awkwardly Anna put her arm about him, laid her head upon his shoulder and let Lachlan comfort her as the cart rolled on down the endless road to Strachan Castle and beyond.

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ISBN 0-340-76722-7
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